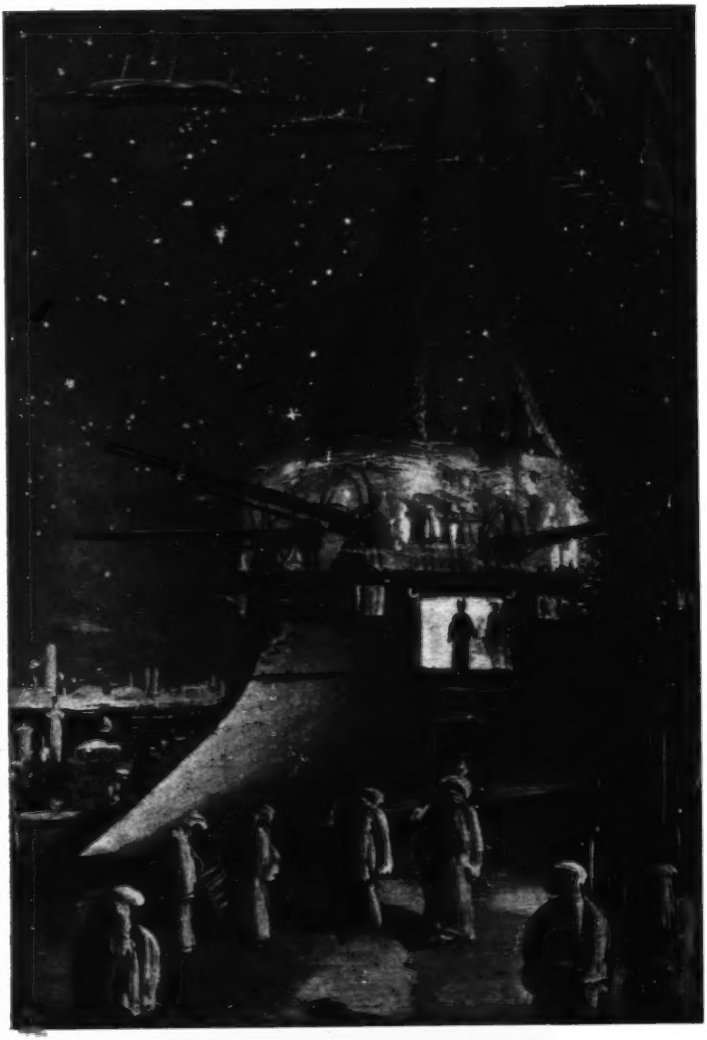
OLGA ROMANOFF



EVIL IN SUCH A SHAPE MIGHT BE SOMETHING MORE THAN GOOD.
(*Frontispiece.*)

See page 176.

OLGA . . . ROMANOFF.

BY

GEORGE GRIFFITH.

AUTHOR OF

"THE ANGEL OF THE REVOLUTION," "THE OUTLAWS OF THE AIR," "VALDAR THE OFT-BORN," "BRITON OR BOER?" "THE ROMANCE OF GOLDEN STAR."

ETC., ETC.

"And so they waited—waited while the ages-old snow and ice melted from the bare, black rocks under the fierce breath of the fire-storm; while the ocean of flame seethed and roared and eddied about them, licking up the seas and melted snows, and fighting with them as fire and water have fought since the world began; while the foundations of the Southern Pole quivered and rocked beneath their feet, and the walls of their refuge quaked and cracked with the throes of the writhing earth, and cosmos was dissolved into chaos once more."—p. 368.

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS
BY FRED T. JANE.

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TO

HIRAM STEVENS MAXIM

THE FIRST MAN WHO HAS FLOWN

BY MECHANICAL MEANS

AND SO APPROACHED MOST NEARLY

TO THE LONG-SOUGHT IDEAL

OF

AERIAL NAVIGATION

THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE INSCRIBED

BY

THE AUTHOR

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OLGA ROMANOFF.

PROLOGUE.

THE PROPHECY OF NATAS.

These are the last words of Israel di Muraka, known in the days of strife as Natas, the Master of the Terror, given to the Children of Deliverance dwelling in the land of Aeria, in the twenty-fifth year of the Peace, which, in the reckoning of the West, is the year nineteen hundred and thirty.

MY life is lived, and the wings of the Angel of Death overshadow me as I write; but before the last summons comes, I must obey the spirit within me that bids me tell of the things that I have seen, in order that the story of them shall not die, nor be disguised by false reports, as the years multiply and the mists gather over the graves of those who, with me, have seen and wrought them.

For this reason the words that I write shall be read publicly in the ears of you and your children and your children's children, until they shall see a sign in heaven to tell them that the end is at hand. No man among you shall take away from that which I have written, nor yet add anything to it; and every fifth year, at the Festival of Deliverance, which is held on the Anniversary of Victory,[1] this writing of mine

[1] The 8th of December, on which day, in the year 1904, the armies of the Anglo-Saxon Federation and the aerial navy of the Terrorists defeated and almost annihilated the hosts of the Franco-Slavonian League, then besieging

shall be read, that those who shall hear it with understanding may lay its warnings to heart, and that the lessons of the Great Deliverance may never be forgotten among you.

It was in the days before the beginning of peace that I, Natas the Jew, cast down and broken by the hand of the Tyrant, conceived and created that which was known as the Terror. The kings of the earth and their servants trembled before my invisible presence, for my arm was long and my hand was heavy; yet no man knew where or when I should strike—only that the blow would be death to him on whom it should fall, and that nowhere on earth should he find a safe refuge from it.

In those days the earth was ruled by force and cunning, and the nations were armed camps set one against the other. Millions of men, who had no quarrel with their neighbours, stood waiting for the word of their rulers to blast the fair fields of earth with the fires of war, and to make desolate the homes of those who had done them no wrong.

In the third year of the twentieth century, Richard Arnold, the Englishman, conquered the empire of the air, and made the first ship that flew as a bird does, of its own strength and motion. He joined the Brotherhood of Freedom, then known among men as the Terrorists, of whom I, Natas, was the Master, and then he built the aerial fleet which, in the day of Armageddon, gave us the victory over the tyrants of the earth.

At the same time, Alan Tremayne, a noble of the English people, into whose soul I had caused my spirit to enter in order that he might serve me and bring the day of deliverance nearer, caused all the nations of the Anglo-Saxon race to join hands, from the West unto the East, in a league of common blood and kindred; and they, in the appointed hour, stood between the sons and daughters of men and those who would have enslaved them afresh.

The chief of these was Alexander Romanoff, last of the

London under the command of Alexander Romanoff, last of the Tsars of Russia, and so made possible the universal disarmament which took place the following year.—*The Angel of the Revolution*, chap. xlvi.

Tsars, or Tyrants, of Russia, whose armies, leagued with those of France, Italy, Spain, and certain lesser Powers, and assisted by a great fleet of war-balloons that could fly, though slowly, wherever they were directed, swept like a destroying pestilence from the western frontiers of Russia to the eastern shores of Britain; and when they had gained the mastery of Europe, invaded England and laid siege to London.

But here their path of conquest was brought to an end, for Alan Tremayne and his brothers of the Terror called upon the men of Anglo-Saxondom to save their Motherland from her enemies, and they rose in their wrath, millions strong, and fell upon them by land and sea, and would have destroyed them utterly, as I had bidden them do, but that Natasha, who was my daughter and was known in those days as the Angel of the Revolution, pleaded for the remnant of them, and they were spared.

But the Russians we slew without mercy to the last man of those who had stood in arms against us, saving only the Tyrant and his princes and the leaders of his armies. These we took prisoners and sent, with their wives and their children, to die in their own prison-land in Siberia, as they had sent thousands of innocent men and women to die before them.

This was my judgment upon them for the wrong that they had done to me and mine, for in the hour of victory I spared not those who had not known how to spare. Now they are dead, and their graves are nameless. Their name is a by-word among men, for they were strong and they used their strength to do evil.

So we made an end of tyranny among the nations, and when the world-war was at length brought to an end, we disbanded all the armies that were upon land and sank the war-ships that were left upon the sea, that men might no more fight with each other. War, that had been called honourable since the world began, we made a crime of blood-guiltiness, for which the life of him who sought to commit it should pay; and as a crime, you, the children of those who have delivered the nations from it, shall for ever hold it to be.

We leave you the command of the air, and that is the command of the world; but should it come to pass—as in the progress of knowledge it may well do—that others in the world outside Aeria shall learn to navigate the air as you do, you shall go forth to battle with them and destroy them utterly, for we have made it known through all the earth that he who seeks to build a second navy of the air shall be accounted an enemy of peace, whose purpose it is to bring war upon the earth again.

Forget not that the blood-lust is but tamed, not quenched, in the souls of men, and that long years must pass before it is purged from the world for ever. We have given peace on earth, and to you, our children, we bequeath the sacred trust of keeping it. We have won our world-empire by force, and by force you must maintain it.

In the day of battle we shed the blood of millions without ruth to win it, and so far the end has justified the means we used. Since the sun set upon Armageddon, and the right to make war was taken from the rulers of the nations, we have governed a realm of peace and prosperity which every year has seen better and happier than that which went before.

No man has dared to draw the sword upon his brother, or by force or fraud to take that which was not his by right. The soil of earth has been given back to the use of her sons, and their wealth has already multiplied a hundredfold on every hand. Kings have ruled with wisdom and justice, and senates have ceased their wranglings to soberly seek out and promote the welfare of their own countries, and to win the respect and friendship of others.

Yet many of these are the same men who, but a few years ago, rent each other like wild beasts in savage strife for the meanest ends; who betrayed their brothers and slaughtered their neighbours, that the rich might be richer, and the strong stronger, in the pitiless battle for wealth and power. They have become peaceful and honest with each other, because we have compelled them to be so, and because they know that the

penalty of wrong-doing in high places is destruction swift and certain as the stroke of the hand of Fate itself.

They know that no man stands so high that our hand cannot cast him down to the dust, and that no spot of earth is so secret and so distant that the transgressor of our laws can find in it a refuge from our vengeance. We stand between the few strong and cunning who would oppress, and the many weak and simple who could not resist them; and when we are gone, you will hear the voice of duty calling you to take our places.

When you stand where we do now, remember who you are and the tremendous trust that is laid upon you. You are the children of the chosen out of many nations, masters of the world, and, under Heaven, the arbiters of human destiny. You shall rule the world as we have ruled it for a hundred years from now. If in that time men shall not have learnt the ways of wisdom and justice, you may be sure that they will never learn them, and deserve only to be left to their own foolishness. Since the world began, the path of life has never lain so fair and straight before the sons of men as it does now, and never was it so easy to do the right and so hard to do the wrong.

So, for a hundred years to come, you shall keep them in the path in which we have set them, and those that would wilfully turn aside from it you shall destroy without mercy, lest they lead others into misery and bring the evil days upon earth again.

At the twenty-fifth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, you shall give back the sceptre of the world-empire into the hands of the children of those from whom we took it,—because they wielded it for oppression, and not for mercy. At that time you shall make it known throughout the earth that men are once more free to do good or evil, according to their choice, and that as they choose well or ill so shall they live or die.

And woe to them in those days if, knowing the good, they shall turn aside to do evil! Beyond the clouds that gather

over the sunset of my earthly life, I see a sign in heaven as of a flaming sword, whose hilt is in the hand of the Master of Destiny, and whose blade is outstretched over the habitations of men.

As they shall choose to do good or evil, so shall that sword pass away from them or fall upon them, and consume them utterly in the midst of their pride. And if they, knowing the good, shall elect to do evil, it shall be with them as of old the Prophet said of the men of Babylon the Great: Their cities shall be a desolation, a dry land and a wilderness; a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither shall any son of man pass thereby.

For from among the stars of heaven, whose lore I have learned and whose voices I have heard, there shall come the messenger of Fate, and his shape shall be that of a flaming fire, and his breath as the breath of a pestilence that men shall feel and die in the hour that it breathes upon them.

Out of the depths beyond the light of the sun he shall come, and your children of the fifth generation shall behold his approach. The sister-worlds shall see him pass with fear and trembling, wondering which of them he shall smite, but if he be not restrained or turned aside by the Hand which guides the stars in their courses, it shall go hard with this world and the men of it in the hour of his passing.

Then shall the highways of the earth be waste, and the wayfaring of men cease. Earth shall languish and mourn for her children that are no more, and Death shall reign amidst the silence, sole sovereign of many lands!

But you, so long as you continue to walk in the way of wisdom, shall live in peace until the end, whether it shall come then or in the ages that shall follow. And if it shall come then, you shall await it with fortitude, knowing that this life is but a single link in the chain of existence which stretches through infinity; and that, if you shall be found worthy, you shall be taught how a chosen few among your sons and daughters shall survive the ruin of the world, to be the parents of the new race, and replenish the earth and possess it.

Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death I stretch forth my hands in blessing to you, the children of the coming time, and pray that the peace which the men of the generation now passing away have won through strife and toil in the fiery days of the Terror, may be yours and endure unbroken unto the end.

CHAPTER I.

THE SURRENDER OF THE WORLD-THRONE.

A HUNDRED years had passed since Natas, the Master of the Terror, had given into the hands of Richard Arnold his charge to the future generations of the Aerians—as the descendants of the Terrorists who had colonised the mountain-walled valley of Aeria, in Central Africa, were now called; since the man, who had planned and accomplished the greatest revolution in the history of the world, had given his last blessing to his companions-in-arms and their children, and had "turned his face to the wall and died."

It was midday, on the 8th of December 2030, and the rulers of all the civilised States of the world were gathered together in St. Paul's Cathedral to receive, from the hands of a descendant of Natas in the fourth generation, the restoration of the right of independent national rule which, on the same spot a hundred and twenty-five years before, had been taken from the sovereigns of Europe and vested in the Supreme Council of the Anglo-Saxon Federation.

The period of tutelage had passed. Under the wise and firm rule of the Council and the domination of the Anglo-Saxon race, the Golden Age had seemed to return to the world. For a hundred and twenty-five years there had been peace on earth, broken only by the outbreak and speedy suppression of a few tribal wars among the more savage races of Africa and Malaysia. Now the descendants of those who had been victors

and vanquished in the world-war of 1904, had met to give back and assume the freedom and the responsibility of national independence.

The vast cathedral was thronged, as it had been on the momentous day when Natas had pronounced his judgment on the last of the Tyrants of Russia, and ended the old order of things in Europe. But it was filled by a very different assembly to that which had stood within its walls on the morrow of Armageddon.

Then the stress and horror of a mighty conflict had set its stamp on every face. Hate had looked out of eyes in which the tears were scarcely dry, and hungered fiercely for the blood of the oppressor. The clash of arms, the stern command, and the pitiless words of doom had sounded then in ears which but a few hours before had listened to the roar of artillery and the thunder of battle. That had been the dawn of the morrow of strife; this was the zenith of the noon of peace.

Now, in all the vast assembly, no hand held a weapon, no face was there which showed a sign of sorrow, fear, or anger, and in no heart, save only two among the thousands, was there a thought of hate or bitterness.

For three days past the Festival of Deliverance had been celebrated all over the civilised world, and now, in the centre of the city which had come to be the capital, not only of the vast domains of Anglo-Saxondom, but of the whole world, a solemn act of renunciation was to be performed, upon the issues of which the fate of all humanity would hang; for the members of the Supreme Council had come through the skies from their seat of empire in Aeria to abdicate the world-throne in obedience to the command of the dead Master, from whom their ancestors had derived it.

At a table, drawn across the front of the chancel, sat the President and the twelve men who with him had up to this hour shared the empire of the human race. Below the steps, on the floor of the cathedral, sat, in a wide semicircle, the rulers of the kingdoms and republics of the earth, assembled to hear the last word of their over-lords, and to receive from them

the power and responsibility of maintaining or forfeiting, as the event should prove, the blessings which had multiplied under the sovereignty of the Aerians.

The President of the Council was the direct descendant not only of Alan Tremayne, its first President, but also of Richard Arnold and Natasha; for their eldest son, born in the first year of the Peace, had married the only daughter of Tremayne, and their first-born son had been his father's father.

Although the average physique of civilised man had immensely improved under the new order of things, the Aerians, descendants of the pick of the nations of Europe, were as far superior to the rest of the assembly as the latter would have been to the men and women of the nineteenth century; but even amongst the members of the Council, the splendid stature and regal dignity of Alan Arnold, the President, stamped him as a born ruler of men, whose title rested upon something higher than election or inheritance.

At the last stroke of twelve, the President rose in his place, and, in the midst of an almost breathless silence, read the message of Natas to the great congregation. This done, he laid the parchment down on the table and, beginning from the outbreak of the world-war, rapidly and lucidly sketched out the vast and beneficent changes in the government of society that its issues had made possible.

He traced the marvellous development of the new civilisation, which, in four generations, had raised men from a state of half-barbarous strife and brutality to one of universal peace and prosperity; from inhuman and unsparing competition to friendly co-operation in public, and generous rivalry in private concerns; from horrible contrasts of wealth and misery to a social state in which the removal of all unnatural disabilities in the race of life had made them impossible.

He showed how, in the evil times which, as all men hoped, had been left behind for ever, the strong and the unscrupulous ruthlessly oppressed the weak and swindled the honest and the straightforward. Now dishonesty was dishonourable in fact as well as in name; the game of life was played fairly, and its

prizes fell to all who could win them, by native genius or earnest endeavour.

There were no inequalities, save those which Nature herself had imposed upon all men from the beginning of time. There were no tyrants and no slaves. That which a man's labour of hand or brain had won was his, and no man might take toll of it. All useful work was held in honour, and there was no other road to fame or fortune save that of profitable service to humanity.

"This," said the President in conclusion, "is the splendid heritage that we of the Supreme Council, which is now to cease to exist as such, have received from our forefathers, who won it for us and for you on the field of the world's Armageddon. We have preserved their traditions intact, and obeyed their commands to the letter; and now the hour has come for us, in obedience to the last of those commands, to resign our authority and to hand over that heritage to you, the rulers of the civilised world, to hold in trust for the peoples over whom you have been appointed to reign.

"When I have done speaking I shall no longer be President of the Senate, which for a hundred and twenty-five years has ruled the world from pole to pole and east to west. You and your parliaments are henceforth free to rule as you will. We shall take no further part in the control of human affairs outside our domain, saving only in one concern.

"In the days when our command was established, the only possible basis of all rule was force, and our supremacy was based on the force that we could bring to bear upon those who might have ventured to oppose us or revolted against our rule. We commanded, and we will still command, the air, and I should not be doing my duty, either to my own people or to you, if I did not tell you that the Aerians, not as the world-rulers that they have been, but as the citizens of an independent State, mean to keep that power in their own hands at all costs.

"The empire of earth and sea, saving only the valley of Aeria, is yours to do with as you will. The empire of the air

is ours,—the heritage that we have received from the genius of that ancestor of mine who first conquered it.

"That we have not used it in the past to oppress you is the most perfect guarantee that we shall not do so in the future, but let all the nations of the earth clearly understand, that we shall accept any attempt to dispute it with us as a declaration of war upon us, and that those who make that attempt will either have to exterminate us or be exterminated themselves. This is not a threat, but a solemn warning; and the responsibility of once more bringing the curse of war and all its attendant desolation upon the earth, will lie heavily upon those who neglect it.

"A few more needful words and I have done. The message of the Master, which I have read to you, contains a prophecy, as to the fulfilment of which neither I nor any man here may speak with certainty. It may be that he, with clearer eyes than ours, saw some tremendous catastrophe impending over the world, a catastrophe which no human means could avert, and beneath which human strength and genius could only bow with resignation.

"By what spirit he was inspired when he uttered the prophecy, it is not for us to say. But before you put it aside as an old man's dream, let me ask you to remember, that he who uttered it was a man who was able to plan the destruction of one civilisation, and to prepare the way for another and a better.

"Such a man, standing midway between the twin mysteries of life and death, might well see that which is hidden from our grosser sight. But whether the prophecy itself shall prove true or false, it shall be well for you and for your children's children if you and they shall receive the lesson that it teaches as true.

"If, in the days that are to come, the world shall be overwhelmed with a desolation that none shall escape, will it not be better that the end shall come and find men doing good rather than evil? As you now set the peoples whom you govern in the right or the wrong path, so shall they walk.

"This is the lesson of all the generations that have gone before us, and it shall also be true of those that are to come after us. As the seed is, so is the harvest; therefore see to it that you, who are now the free rulers of the nations, so discharge the awful trust and responsibility which is thus laid upon you, that your children's children shall not, perhaps in the hour of Humanity's last agony, rise up and curse your memory rather than bless it. I have spoken!"

CHAPTER II.

A CROWNLESS KING.

ATE in the evening of the same day two of the President's audience — the only two who had heard his words with anger and hatred instead of gratitude and joy — were together in a small but luxuriously-furnished room, in an octagonal turret which rose from one of the angles of a large house on the southern slope of the heights of Hampstead.

One was a very old man, whose once giant frame was wasted and shrunken by the slow siege of many years, and on whose withered, care-lined features death had already set its fatal seal. The other was a young girl, in all the pride and glory of budding womanhood, and beautiful with the dark, imperious beauty that is transmitted, like a priceless heirloom, along a line of proud descent unstained by any drop of base-born blood.

Yet in her beauty there was that which repelled as well as attracted. No sweet and gentle woman-soul looked out of the great, deep eyes, that changed from dusky-violet to the blackness of a starless night as the sun and shade of her varying moods swept over her inner being. Her straight, dark brows were almost masculine in their firmness; and the voluptuous promise of her full, red, sensuous lips was belied by the strength of her chin and the defiant poise of her splendid head on the strongly-moulded throat, whose smooth skin showed so dazzlingly white against the dark purple velvet of the collar of her dress.

It was a beauty to enslave and command rather than to woo and win; the fatal loveliness of a Cleopatra, a Lucrezia, or a Messalina; a charm to be used for evil rather than for good. In a few years she would be such a woman as would drive men mad for the love of her, and, giving no love in return, use them for her own ends, and cast them aside with a smile when they could serve her no longer.

The old man was lying on a low couch of magnificent furs, against whose dark lustre the grey pallor of his skin and the pure, silvery whiteness of his still thick hair and beard showed up in strong contrast. He had been asleep for the last four hours, resting after the exertion of going to the cathedral, and the girl was sitting watching him with anxious eyes, every now and then leaning forward to catch the faint sound of his slow and even breathing, and make sure that he was still alive.

A clock in one of the corners of the room chimed a quarter to nine, as the old man raised his hand to his brow and opened his eyes. They rested for a moment on the girl's face, and then wandered inquiringly about the room, as though he expected someone else to be present. Then he said in a low, weak voice—

"What time is it? Has Serge come yet?"

"No," said the girl, glancing up at the clock; "that was only a quarter to nine, and he is not due until the hour."

"No; I remember. I don't suppose he can be here much before. Meanwhile get me the draught ready, so that I shall have strength to do what has to be done before"—

"Are you sure it is necessary for you to take that terrible drug? Why should you sacrifice what may be months or even years of life, to gain a few hours' renewed youth?"

The girl's voice trembled as she spoke, and her eyes melted in a sudden rush of tears. The one being that she loved in all the world was this old man, and he had just told her to prepare his death-draught.

"Do as I bid you, child," he said, raising his voice to a querulous cry, "and do it quickly, while there is yet time. Why do you talk to me of a few more months of life—to me,

whose eyes have seen the snows of a hundred winters whitening the earth? I tell you that, drug or no drug, I shall not see the setting of to-morrow's sun. As I slept, I heard the rush of the death-angel's wings through the night, and the wind of them was cold upon my brow. Do as I bid you, quick—there is the door-telephone. Serge is here!"

As he spoke, a ring sounded in the lower part of the house. Accustomed to blind obedience from her infancy, the girl choked back her rising tears and went to a little cupboard let into the wall, out of which she took two small vials, each containing about a fluid ounce of colourless liquid. She placed a tumbler in the old man's hand, and emptied the vials into it simultaneously.

There was a slight effervescence, and the two colourless liquids instantly changed to deep red. The moment that they did so, the dying man put the glass to his lips and emptied it at a gulp. Then he threw himself back upon his pillows, and let the glass fall from his hand upon the floor. At the same moment a little disc of silver flew out at right angles to the wall near the door, and a voice said—

"Serge Nicholaivitch is here to command."

"Serge Nicholaivitch is welcome. Let him ascend!" said the girl, walking towards the transmittor, and replacing the disc as she ceased speaking.

A few moments later there was a tap on the door. The girl opened it and admitted a tall, splendidly-built young fellow of about twenty-two, dressed, according to the winter costume of the time, in a close-fitting suit of dark-blue velvet, long boots of soft, brown leather that came a little higher than the knee, and a long, fur-lined, hooded cloak, which was now thrown back, and hung in graceful folds from his broad shoulders.

As he entered, the girl held out her hand to him in silence. A bright flush rose to her clear, pale cheeks as he instantly dropped on one knee and kissed it, as in the old days a favoured subject would have kissed the hand of a queen.

"Welcome, Serge Nicholaivitch, Prince of the House of

Romanoff! Your bride and your crown are waiting for you!"

The words came clear and strong from the lips which, but a few minutes before, had barely been able to frame a coherent sentence. The strange drug had wrought a miracle of restoration. Fifty years seemed to have been lifted from the shoulders of the man who would never see another sunrise.

The light of youth shone in his eyes, and the flush of health on his cheeks. The deep furrows of age and care had vanished from his face, and, saving only for his long, white hair, if one who had seen Alexander Romanoff, the last of the Tsars of Russia, on the battlefield of Muswell Hill could have come back to earth, he would have believed that he saw him once more in the flesh.

Without any assistance he rose from the couch, and drew himself up to the full of his majestic height. As he did so the young man dropped on his knee before him, as he had done before the girl, and said in Russian—

"The honour is too great for my unworthiness. May heaven make me worthy of it!"

"Worthy you are now, and shall remain so long as you shall keep undefiled the faith and honour of the Imperial House from which you are sprung," replied the old man in the same language, raising him from his knee as he spoke. Then he laid his hands on the young man's shoulders, and, looking him straight in the eyes, went on—

"Serge Nicholaivitch, you know why I have bidden you come here to-night. Speak now, without fear or falsehood, and tell me whether you come prepared to take that which I have to give you, and to do that which I shall ask of you. If there is any doubt in your soul, speak it now and go in peace; for the task that I shall lay upon you is no light one, nor may it be undertaken without a whole heart and a soul that is undivided by doubt."

The young man returned his burning gaze with a glance as clear and steady as his own, and replied—

"It is for your Majesty to give and for me to take—for you

to command and for me to obey. Tell me your will, and I will do it to the death. In the hour that I fail, may heaven's mercy fail me too, and may I die as one who is not fit to live!"

"Spoken like a true son of Russia!" said the old man, taking his hands from his shoulders and beckoning the girl to his side. Then he placed them side by side before an *ikon* fastened to the eastern wall, with an ever-burning lamp in front of it. He bade them kneel down and join hands, and as they did so he took his place behind them and, raising his hands as though in invocation above their heads, he said in slow, solemn tones—

"Now, Serge Nicholaivitch and Olga Romanoff, sole heirs on earth of those who once were Tsars of Russia, swear before heaven and all its holy saints that, when this body of mine shall have been committed to the flames, you will take my ashes to Petersburg and lay them in the Church of Peter and Paul, and that when that is done, you will go to the Lossenskis at Moscow, and there, in the Uspènski Sobōr, where your ancestors were crowned, take each other for wedded wife and husband, according to the ancient laws of Russia and the rites of the orthodox church."

The oath was taken by each of the now betrothed pair in turn, and then Paul Romanoff, great-grandson of Alexander, the Last of the Tsars, raised them from their knees and kissed each of them on the forehead. Then, taking from his neck a gold chain with a small key attached to it, he went to one of the oak panels, from which the walls of the room were lined, and pushed aside a portion of the apparently solid beading, disclosing a keyhole into which he inserted the key.

He turned the key and pulled, and the panel swung slowly out like a door. It was lined with three inches of solid steel, and behind it was a cavity in the wall, from which came the sheen of gold and the gleam of jewels. A cry of amazement broke at the same moment from the lips of both Olga and Serge, as they saw what the glittering object was.

Paul Romanoff took it out of the steel-lined cavity, and laid it reverently on the table, saying, as he did so—

"To-morrow I shall be dead, and this house and all that is

in it will be yours. There is my most precious possession, the Imperial crown of Russia, stolen when the Kremlin was plundered in the days of the Terror, and restored secretly to my father by the faith and devotion of one of the few who remained loyal after the fall of the Empire.

"In a few hours it will be yours. I leave it to you as a sacred heritage from the past for you to hand on to the future, and with it you shall receive and hand on a heritage of hate and vengeance, which you shall keep hot in your hearts and in the hearts of your children against the day of reckoning when it comes.

"Now sit down on the divan yonder, and listen with your ears and your hearts as well, for these are the last words that I shall speak with the lips of flesh, and you must remember them, that you may tell them to your children, and perchance to their children after them, as I now tell them to you; for the hour of vengeance may not come in your day nor yet in theirs, though in the fulness of time it shall surely come, and therefore the story must never be forgotten while a Romanoff remains to remember it."

The old man, on whom the strange drug that he had taken was still exercising its wonderful effects, threw himself into an easy-chair as he spoke, and motioned them with his hand towards a second low couch against one of the walls, covered with cushions and draped with neutral-tinted, silken hangings.

Olga, moving, as it seemed, with the unconscious motion of a somnambulist, allowed her form to sink back upon the cushions until she half sat and half reclined on them; and Serge, laying one of the cushions on the floor, sat at her feet, and drew one of her hands unresistingly over his shoulder, and kept it there as though she were caressing him. Thus they waited for Paul Romanoff to teach them the lesson that they had sworn to teach in turn to the generations that were to come.

The old man regarded them in silence for a moment or two, and as he did so the angry fire died out of his eyes, and his lips parted in a faint smile as he said, rather in soliloquy to himself than to them—

"As it was in the beginning, it is now and for ever shall be until the end! Empires wax and wane, and dynasties rise and fall! Revolutions come and go, and the face of the world is changed, but the mystery of the sex, the beauty of woman, and the love of man, endure changeless as Destiny, for they are Destiny itself!"

As he spoke, the fixed, rigid look melted from Olga's face. The bright flush rose again to her cheeks, and she bowed her royal head, and looked almost tenderly at the blond, ruddy, young giant at her feet. After all, he was her fate, and she might well have had a worse one.

Then after a brief pause, Paul Romanoff began to speak again, slowly and quietly, with his eyes fixed on the glittering symbol of the vanished sovereignty of his House, as though he were addressing it, and communing with the mournful memories that it recalled from the past.

"It is a hundred and twenty-five years since the hand of Natas, the Jew, came forth out of the unknown, and struck you from the brow of the Last of the Tsars. On the day that Natas died, I was born, a hundred years ago. There are barely a score of men left on earth who have seen and spoken with the men who saw the Great Revolt and the beginning of the Terror, and I alone, of the elder line of Romanoff, remain to pass the story of our House's shame and ruin on, so that it may not be forgotten against the day of vengeance, that I have waited for in vain.

"But I have no time left for dreams or vain regrets. Listen, Children of the Present, and take my words with you into the future that it is not given to me to see."

He passed his hands upwards over his eyes and brow, and then went on, speaking now directly to Olga and Serge, in a quick, earnest tone, as though he feared that his fictitious strength would fail him before he could say what he had to say—

"When Alexander, the last of the crowned Emperors of Russia, fell down dead on the morning after he reached the mines of Kara, to which the Terrorists had exiled him as a convict for life, those who remained of his family, and who had

taken no part in the war, were allowed to return to Europe, on condition that they lived the lives of private citizens and sought no share in the government of any country to which they were allied by marriage or otherwise.

"Only two of those who had survived the march to Siberia were able to avail themselves of this permission, and these were Olga, the daughter of Alexander, and Serge Nicholaivitch, the youngest son of his nephew Nicholas. These two settled at the Court of Denmark, and there, two years later, Olga married Prince Ingeborg. Her first-born son, the only one of her children who lived beyond infancy, was my father, as my own first-born son was yours, Olga Romanoff.

"Serge married Dagmar, the youngest daughter of the House of Denmark, three years later, and from him you, Serge Nicholaivitch, are descended in the fourth generation. Thus in you will be united the only two remaining branches of the once mighty House of Romanoff. May the day come when, in you or your children, its ancient glories shall be restored!"

"Amen!" said Olga and Serge in a single breath, and as she uttered the words, Olga's eyes fell on the lost crown upon the table, and for the moment they seemed to flame with the inner fires of a quenchless rage. Paul Romanoff's eyes answered hers flash for flash, for the same hatred and longing for revenge possessed them both—the old man who had carried the weight of a hundred years to the brink of the grave, and the young girl whose feet were still lingering on the dividing line between girlhood and womanhood.

Then he went on, speaking with an added tone of fierceness in his voice—

"From the day of my birth until this, the night of my death, it has been impossible to do anything to recover that which was lost in the Great Revolt. Not that stout hearts and keen brains and willing hands have been wanting for the work; but because the strong arm of the Terror has encircled the earth with unbreakable bonds; because its eye has never slept; and because its hand has hurled infallible destruction upon all who have dared to take the first step towards freedom.

"Natas spoke truly when he said that the Terrorists had ruled the world by force, and Alan Arnold to-day spoke truly after him when he said that the supremacy of the Aerians was based upon the force that they could bring to bear upon any who revolted against them, through their possession of the empire of the air.

"It is this priceless possession that gives them the command of the world, and for a hundred years they have guarded it so jealously, that they have slain without mercy all who have ventured to take even the first step towards an independent solution of the mighty problem which Richard Arnold solved a hundred and twenty-six years ago.

"The last man who died in this cause was my only son, and your father, Olga. Remember that, for it is not the least item in the legacy of revenge that I bequeath to you to-night. He had devoted his life, as many others had done before him, to the task of discovering the secret of the motive power of the Terrorists' air-ships.

"The year you were born, success had crowned the efforts of ten years of tireless labour. Working with the utmost secrecy in a lonely hut buried in the forests of Norway, he and six others, who were, as he thought, devoted to him and the glorious cause of wresting the empire of the world from the grasp of the Terrorists, had built an air-ship that would have been swifter and more powerful than any of their aerial fleet.

"Two days before she was ready to take the air, one of his men deserted. The traitor was never seen again, but the next night a Terrorist vessel descended from the clouds, and in a few minutes not a vestige of our air-ship or her creators remained. Only a blackened waste in the midst of the forest was left to show the scene of their labours. Within forty-eight hours, it was known all over the civilised world that Vladimir Romanoff and his associates had been killed by order of the Supreme Council, for endeavouring to build an air-ship in defiance of its commands.

"Such are the enemies against whom you will have to contend. They are still virtually the masters of the world, and the

NOT A VESTIGE OF OUR AIR-SHIP OR HER CREATORS REMAINED.

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task before you is to wrest that mastery from them. It is no light task, but it is not impossible; for these Aerians are, after all, but men and women as you are, and what they have done, other men and women can surely do.

"The Great Secret cannot always remain theirs alone. While they actively controlled the nations, nothing could be done against them, for their hand was everywhere and their eyes saw everything. But now they have abdicated the throne of the world, and left the nations to rule themselves as they can. For a time things will go on in their present grooves, but that will not be for long.

"I, who am their bitterest enemy on earth, am forced to confess that the Terrorists have proved themselves to be the wisest as well as the strongest of despots. Under their rule the world has become a paradise—for the *canaille* and the multitude. But they have curbed the mob as well as the king, and abolished the demagogue as well as the despot. Now the strong hand is lifted and the bridle loosed; and before many years have passed, the brute strength of the multitude will have begun to assert itself.

"The so-called kings of the earth, who rule now in a mockery of royalty, will speedily find that the real kings of the old days ruled because, in the last resource, they had armies and navies at their command and could enforce obedience. These are but the puppets of the popular will, and now that the moral and physical support of the Supreme Council and its aerial fleet is taken from them, they will see democracy run rampant, and, having no strength to stem the tide, they will have to float with it or be submerged by it.

"In another generation the voice of the majority, the blind, brute force of numbers, will rule everything on earth. What government there may be, will be a mere matter of counting heads. Individual freedom will by swift degrees vanish from the earth, and human society will become a huge machine, grinding all men down to the same level until the monotony of life becomes unendurable.

"Hitherto all democracies in the history of the world have

been ended by military despotisms, but now military despotism has been made impossible, and so democracy will run riot, until it plunges the world into social chaos.

"This may come in your time or in your children's, but it is the opportunity for which you must work and wait. Even now you will find in every nation, thousands of men and women who are chafing against the limitations imposed on individual aspirations and ambition; and as the rule of democracy spreads and becomes heavier, the number of these will increase, until at last revolt will become possible, nay, inevitable.

"Of this revolt you must make yourselves the guiding-spirits. The work will be long and arduous, but you have all your lives before you, and the reward of success will be glorious beyond all description.

"Not only will you restore the House of Romanoff to its ancient glories in yourselves and your children, but you will enthrone it in an even higher place than that which your ancestor had almost won for it, when these thrice-accursed Terrorists turned the tide of battle against him on the threshold of the conquest of the world.

"Do not shrink from the task, or despair because you are now only two against the world. Think of Natas and the mighty work that he did, and remember that he was once only one against the world which in the day of battle he fought and conquered.

"Above all things, never let your eyes wander from the land of the Aerians. That once conquered and the world is yours to do with as you will. To do that, you must first conquer the air as they have done. Aeria itself, by all reports, is such a paradise as the sun nowhere else shines upon. Some day, whether by force or cunning, it may be yours; and when it is, the world also will be yours to be your footstool and your plaything, and all the peoples of the earth shall be your servants to do your bidding.

"Yes, I can see, through the mists of the coming years and beyond the grave that opens at my feet, aerial navies, flying the Eagle of Russia and scaling the mighty battlements of Aeria,

hurling their lightnings far and wide in the work of vengeance long delayed! Behind the battle, I see darkness that my weak eyes cannot pierce, but yours shall see clearly where mine are clouded with the falling mists of death.

"The shadows are closing round me, and the sands in the glass are almost run out. Yet one thing remains to be done. Since Alexander Romanoff died at the mines of Kara, no Tsar of Russia has been crowned. Now I, Paul Romanoff, his rightful heir, will crown myself after the fashion of my ancestors, and then I will crown you, the daughter of my murdered son, and you will place the diadem on your husband's brow when God has made you one!"

So saying, the old man rose from his seat, with his face flushed and his eyes aglow with the light of ecstasy. Olga and Serge rose to their feet, half in fear and half in wonder, as they looked upon his transfigured countenance.

He lifted the Imperial crown from the table, and then, drawing himself up to the full height of his majestic stature, raised it high above his head, and lowered it slowly down towards his brow.

The jewelled circlet of gold had almost touched the silver of his snowy hair when the light suddenly died out of his eyes, leaving the glaze of death behind it. He gasped once for breath, and then his mighty form shrank together and pitched forward in a huddled heap at their feet, flinging the crown with a dull crash to the floor, and sending it rolling away into a corner of the room.

"God grant that may not be an omen, Olga!" said Serge, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the sudden horror of the sight.

"Omen or not, I will do his bidding to the end," said the girl slowly and solemnly. Then her pent-up passion of grief burst forth in a long, wailing cry, and she flung herself down on the prostrate form of the only friend she had ever known and loved, and laid her cheek upon his, and let the welling tears run from her eyes over those that had for ever ceased to weep.

CHAPTER III.

TSARINA OLGA.

HREE days after his death, the body of Paul Romanoff was reduced to ashes in the Highgate Crematorium, a magnificent building, in the sombre yet splendid architecture of ancient Egypt, which stood in the midst of what had once been Highgate Cemetery, and what was now a beautiful garden, shaded by noble trees, and in summer ablaze with myriads of flowers.

Not a grave or a headstone was to be seen, for burial in the earth had been abolished throughout the civilised world for nearly a century. In the vast galleries of the central building, thousands of urns, containing the ashes of the dead, reposed in niches inscribed with the name and date of death, but these mostly belonged to the poorer classes, for the wealthy as a rule devoted a chamber in their own houses to this purpose.

The body was registered in the great Book of the Dead at the Crematorium as that of Paul Ivanitch, and the only two mourners signed their names, "Serge Ivanitch and Olga Ivanitch, grand-children of the deceased." The reason for this was, that for more than a century the name of Romanoff had been proscribed in all the nations of Europe. It was believed that the Vladimir Romanoff who had been executed by the Supreme Council, for attempting to solve the forbidden problem, was the last of his race, and Paul had taken great pains not to disturb this belief.

Long before his son had met with his end, he had called himself Paul Ivanitch, and settled in London and practised his profession as a sculptor, in which he had won both fame and fortune. Olga had lived with him since her father's death, and Serge, who at the time the narrative opens had just completed his studies at the Art University of Rome, had passed as her brother.

They took the urn containing the ashes of the old man back with them to the house, which now belonged, with all its contents, to Olga and Serge. On the morning after his death, a notice, accompanied by an abstract of his will, had been inserted in *The Official Gazette*, the journal devoted exclusively to matters of law and government.

Paul Romanoff had, however, left two wills behind him, one which had to be made public in compliance with the law, and one which was intended only for the eyes of Olga and Serge. This second will reposed, with the crown of Russia, in the secret recess in the wall of the octagonal chamber; and the instructions endorsed upon it stated that it was to be opened by Serge in the presence of Olga, after they had brought his ashes back to the house and had been legally confirmed in their possession of his property.

Consequently, on the evening of the 11th, the two shut themselves into the room, and Olga, who since her grandfather's death had worn the key of the recess on a chain round her neck, unlocked the secret door and gave the will to Serge. As she did so, a sudden fancy seized her. She took the crown from its resting-place, and, standing in front of a long mirror which occupied one of the eight sides of the room from roof to floor, poised it above the lustrous coils of her hair with both hands, and said, half to Serge and half to herself—

"What age could not accomplish, youth shall do! By my own right, and with my own hands, I am crowned Tsarina, Empress of the Russias in Europe and Asia. As the great Catherine was, so will I be—and more, for I will be Mistress of the West and the East. I will have kings for my vassals and

senates for my servants, and I will rule as no other woman has ruled before me since Semiramis!"

As she uttered the daring words, whose fulfilment seemed beyond the dreams of the wildest imagination, she placed the crown upon her brow and stood, clothed in imperial purple from head to foot, the very incarnation of loveliness and royal majesty. Serge looked up as she spoke, and gazed for a moment entranced upon her. Then he threw himself upon his knees before her, and, raising the hem of her robe to his lips, said in a voice half choked with love and passion—

"And I, who am also of the imperial blood, will be the first to salute you Tsarina and mistress! You have taken me as your lover, let me also be the first of your subjects. I will serve you as woman never was served before. You shall be my mistress—my goddess, and your words shall be my laws before all other laws. If you bid me do evil, it shall be to me as good, and I will do it. I will kill or leave alive according to your pleasure, and I will hold my own life as cheap as any other in your service; for I love you, and my life is yours!"

Olga looked down upon him with the light of triumph in her eyes. No woman ever breathed to whom such words would not have been sweet; but to her they were doubly sweet, because they were a spontaneous tribute to the power of her beauty and the strength of her royal nature, and an earnest of her future sway over other men.

More than this, too, they had been won without an effort, from the lips of the man whom she had always been taught to look upon as higher than other men, in virtue of his descent from her own ancestry, and the blood-right that he shared with her to that throne which it was to be their joint life-task to re-establish.

If she did not love him, it was rather because ambition and the inborn lust of power engrossed her whole being, than from any lack of worthiness on his part. Of all the men she had ever seen, none compared with him in strength and manliness save one—and he, bitter beyond expression as the thought was

to her, was so far above her as she was now, that he seemed to belong to another world and to another order of beings.

As their eyes met, a thrill that was almost akin to love passed through her soul, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, she took the crown from her own head and held it above his as he knelt at her feet, and said—

"Not as my subject or my servant, but as my co-ruler and helpmate, you shall keep that oath of yours, Serge Nicholaivitch. We have exchanged our vows, and in a few days I shall be your wife. We will wed as equals; and so now I crown you, as it is my right to do. Rise, my lord the Tsar, and take your crown!"

Serge put up his hands and took the crown from hers at the moment that she placed it on his brow. He rose to his feet, holding it on his head as he said solmenly—

"So be it, and may the God of our fathers help me to wear it worthily with you, and to restore to it the glory that has been taken from it by our enemies!"

Then he laid it reverently down on the table and turned to Olga, who was still standing before the mirror looking at her own lovely image, as though in a dream of future glory. He took her unresisting in his arms, and kissed her passionately again and again, bringing the bright blood to her cheeks and the light of a kindred passion to her eyes, and murmuring between the kisses—

"But you, darling, are worth all the crowns of earth, and I am still your slave, because your beauty and your sweetness make me so."

"Then slave you shall be!" she said, giving him back kiss for kiss, well knowing that with every pressure of her intoxicating lips she riveted the chains of his bondage closer upon his soul.

To an outside observer, what had taken place would have seemed but little better than boy-and-girl's play, the phantasy of two young and ardent souls dreaming a romantic and impossible dream of power and glory that had vanished, never to be brought back again. And yet, if such a one had been

able to look forward through little more than a single lustrum, he would have seen that, in the mysterious revolutions of human affairs, it is usually the seemingly impossible that becomes possible, and the most unexpected that comes to pass.

The secret will of Paul Romanoff, to the study of which the two lovers addressed themselves when they awoke from the dream of love and empire into which Olga's phantasy had plunged them both, would, if it had been made public, have given a by no means indefinite shape to such vague dreams of world-revolution as were inspired in thoughtful minds, even in the thirty-first year of the twenty-first century.

It was a voluminous document of many pages, embodying the result of nearly eighty years of tireless scheming and patient research in the field of science as well as in that of politics. Paul Romanoff had lived his life with but one object, and that was, to prepare the way for the accomplishment of a revolution which should culminate in the subversion of the state of society inaugurated by the Terrorists, and the re-establishment, at anyrate in the east of Europe, of autocratic rule in the person of a scion of the House of Romanoff. All that he had been able to do towards the attainment of this seemingly impossible project was crystallised in the document bequeathed to Olga and Serge.

It was divided into three sections. The first of these was mostly of a personal nature, and contained details which it would serve no purpose of use or interest to reproduce here. It will therefore suffice to say, that it contained a list of the names and addresses of four hundred men and women scattered throughout Europe and America, each of whom was the descendant of some prince or noble, some great landowner or millionaire, who had suffered degradation or ruin at the hands of the Terrorists during the reorganisation of society, after the final triumph of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in 1904.

The second section of the will was of a purely scientific and technical character. It was a theoretical arsenal of weapons

for the arming of those who, if they were to succeed at all, could only do so by bringing back that which it had cost such an awful expenditure of blood and suffering to banish from the earth in the days of the Terror. The designs of Paul Romanoff, and the vast aspirations of those to whom he had bequeathed the crown of the great Catherine, could have but one result if they ever passed from the realm of fancy to that of deeds.

If the clock was to be put back, only the armed hand could do it, and that hand must be so armed that it could strike at first secretly, and yet with paralysing effect. The few would have to array themselves against the many, and if they triumphed, it would have to be by the possession of some such means of terrorism and irresistible destruction as those who had accomplished the revolution of 1904 had wielded in their aerial fleet.

By far the most important part of this section of the will consisted of plans and diagrams of various descriptions of airships and submarine vessels, accompanied by minute directions for building and working them. Most of these were from the hand of Vladimir Romanoff, Olga's father; but of infinitely more importance even than all these was a detailed description, on the last page but two of the section, of the solution of a problem which had been attempted in the last decade of the nineteenth century, but which was still unsolved so far as the world at large was concerned.

This was the direct transformation of the solar energy locked up in coal into electrical energy, without loss either by waste or transference. How vast and yet easily controlled a power this would be in the hands of those who were able to wield it, may be guessed from the fact that, in the present day, less than ten per cent. of the latent energy of coal is developed as electrical power even in the most perfect systems of conversion.

All the rest is wasted between the furnace of the steam-engine and the dynamo. It was to electrical power, obtained direct from coal and petroleum, that Vladimir Romanoff trusted

for the motive force of his air-ships and submarine vessels, and which he had already employed with experimental success as regards the former, when his career was cut short by the swift and pitiless execution of the sentence of the Supreme Council.

The remainder of this section was occupied by a list of chemical formulæ for the most powerful explosives then known to science, and minute instructions for their preparation. At the bottom of the page which contained these, there was a little strip of parchment, fastened by one end to the binding of the other sheets, and covered with very small writing.

Olga's eyes, wandering down over the maze of figures which crowded the page, reached it before Serge's did. One quick glance told her that it was something very different to the rest. She laid one hand carelessly over it, and with the other softly caressed Serge's crisp, golden curls. As he looked round in response to the caress, their eyes met, and she said in her sweet, low, witching voice—

"Dearest, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Not a favour to ask, but a command to give, you mean. Speak, and you are obeyed. Have I not sworn obedience?" he replied, laying his hand upon her shoulder and drawing her lovely face closer to his as he spoke.

"No, it is only a favour," she said, with such a smile as Antony might have seen on the lips of Cleopatra. "I want you to leave me alone for a little time—for half an hour—and then come back and finish reading this with me. You know my brain is not as strong as yours, and I feel a little bewildered with all the wonderful things that there are in this legacy of my father's father.

"Before we go any further, I should like to read it all through again by myself, so as to understand it thoroughly. So suppose you go to your smoking-room for a little, and leave me to do so. I shall not take very long, and then we will go over the rest together."

"But we have only a couple more pages to read, sweet one,

and then I will go over it all again with you, and explain anything that you have not understood."

As he spoke, Serge's eyes never wavered for a moment from hers. Could he but have broken their spell, he might have seen that she was hiding something from him under her little, white hand and shapely arm. She brought her red, smiling lips still nearer to his as she almost whispered in reply—

"Well, it is only a girl's whim, after all, but still I am a girl. Come, now, I will give you a kiss for twenty minutes' solitude, and when you come back, and we have finished our task, you shall have as many more as you like."

The sweet, tempting lips came closer still, and the witching spell of her great dusky eyes grew stronger as she spoke. How was he to know what was hanging in the balance in that fateful moment? He was but a hot-blooded youth of twenty, and he worshipped this lovely, girlish temptress, who had not yet seen seventeen summers, with an adoration that blinded him to all else but her and her intoxicating beauty.

He drew her yielding form to him until he could feel her heart beating against his, and as their lips met, the promised kiss came from hers to his. He returned it threefold, and then his arm slipped from her shoulder to her waist, and he lifted her like a child from her chair, and carried her, half laughing and half protesting, to the door, claimed and took another kiss before he released her, and then put her down and left her alone without another word.

"Alas, poor Serge!" she said, as the door closed behind him; "you are not the first man who has lost the empire of the world for a woman's kiss. Before, I saw that you were my equal and helpmate, now you and all other men—yes, not even excepting he who seems so far above me now—shall be my slaves and do my bidding, so blindly that they shall not even know they are doing it.

"Yes, the weapons of war are worth much, but what are they in comparison with the souls of the men who will have to use them!"

In half an hour Serge came back to finish the reading of

the will with her. The little slip of paper had been removed so skilfully that it would have been impossible for him to have even guessed that it had ever been attached to the parchment, or that it was now lying hidden in the bosom of the girl who would have killed him without the slightest scruple to gain the unsuspected possession of it.

CHAPTER IV.

A SON OF THE GODS.

ON the day but one following the reading of Paul Romanoff's secret will, Olga and Serge set out for St. Petersburg, to convey his ashes to their last resting-place in the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in the Fortress of Petropaulovski, where reposed the dust of the Tyrants of Russia, from Peter the Great to Alexander II. of Russia, now only remembered as the chief characters in the dark tragedy of the days before the Revolution.

The intense love of the Russians for their country had survived the tremendous change that had passed over the face of society, and it was still the custom to bring the ashes of those who claimed noble descent and deposit them in one of their national churches, even when they had died in distant countries.

The station from which they started was a splendid structure of marble, glass, and aluminium steel, standing in the midst of a vast, abundantly-wooded garden, which occupied the region that had once been made hideous by the slums and sweating-dens of Southwark. The ground floor was occupied by waiting-rooms, dining-saloons, conservatories, and winter-gardens, for the convenience and enjoyment of travellers; and from these lifts rose to the upper storey, where the platforms and lines lay under an immense crystal arch.

Twelve lines ran out of the station, divided into three sets

of four each. Of these, the centre set was entirely devoted to continental traffic, and the lines of this system stretched without a break from London to Pekin.

The cars ran suspended on a single rail upheld by light, graceful arches of a practically unbreakable alloy of aluminium, steel, and zinc, while about a fifth of their weight was borne by another single insulating rail of forged glass,—the rediscovery of the lost art of making which had opened up immense possibilities to the engineers of the twenty-first century.

Along this lower line the train ran, not on wheels, but on lubricated bearings, which glided over it with no more friction than that of a steel skate on ice. On the upper rail ran double-flanged wheels with ball-bearings, and this line also conducted the electric current from which the motive-power was derived.

The two inner lines of each set were devoted to long-distance, express traffic, and the two outer to intermediate transit, corresponding to the ordinary trains of the present day. Thus, for example, the train by which Olga and Serge were about to travel, stopped only at Brussels, Berlin, Königsberg, Moscow, Nijni Novgorod, Tomsk, Tobolsk, Irkutsk, and Pekin, which was reached by a line running through the Salenga valley and across the great desert of Shamoo, while from Irkutsk another branch of the line ran north-eastward *viâ* Yakutsk to the East Cape, where the Behring Bridge united the systems of the Old World and the New.

The usual speed of the expresses was a hundred and fifty miles an hour, rising to two hundred on the long runs; and that of the ordinary trains, from a hundred to a hundred and fifty. Higher speeds could of course be attained on emergencies, but these had been found to be quite sufficient for all practical purposes.

The cars were not unlike the Pullmans of the present day, save that they were wider and roomier, and were built not of wood and iron, but of aluminium and forged glass. Their interiors were, of course, absolutely impervious to wind and dust, even at the highest speed of the train, although a

perfect system of ventilation kept their atmosphere perfectly fresh.

The long-distance trains were fitted up exactly as moving hotels, and the traveller, from London to Pekin or Montreal, was not under the slightest necessity of leaving the train, unless he chose to do so, from end to end of the journey.

One more advantage of railway travelling in the twenty-first century may be mentioned here. It was entirely free, both for passengers and baggage. Easy and rapid transit being considered an absolute necessity of a high state of civilisation, just as armies and navies had once been thought to be, every self-supporting person paid a small travelling tax, in return for which he or she was entitled to the freedom of all the lines in the area of the Federation.

In addition to this tax, the municipality of every city or town through which the lines passed, set apart a portion of their rent-tax for the maintenance of the railways, in return for the advantages they derived from them.

Under this reasonable condition of affairs, therefore, all that an intending traveller had to do was to signify the date of his departure and his destination to the superintendent of the nearest station, and send his heavier baggage on in advance by one of the trains devoted to the carriage of freight. A place was then allotted to him, and all he had to do was to go and take possession of it.

The Continental Station was comfortably full of passengers when Olga and Serge reached it, about fifteen minutes before the departure of the Eastern express; for people were leaving the Capital of the World in thousands just then, to spend Christmas and New Year with friends in the other cities of Europe, and especially to attend the great Winter Festival that was held every year in St. Petersburg in celebration of the anniversary of Russian freedom.

Ten minutes before the express started, they ascended in one of the lifts to the platform, and went to find their seats. As they walked along the train, Olga suddenly stopped and said, almost with a gasp—

"Look, Serge! There are two Aerians, and one of them is"—

"Who?" said Serge, almost roughly. "I didn't know you had any acquaintances among the Masters of the World."

The son of the Romanoffs hated the very name of the Aerians, so bitterly that even the mere suspicion that his idolised betrothed should have so much as spoken to one of them was enough to rouse his anger.

"No, I haven't," she replied quietly, ignoring the sudden change in his manner; "but both you and I have very good reason for wishing to make their distinguished acquaintance. I recognise one of these because he sat beside Alan Arnold, the President of the Council, in St. Paul's, when they were foolish enough to relinquish the throne of the world in obedience to an old man's whim.

"The taller of the two standing there by the pillar is the younger counterpart of the President, and if his looks don't belie him, he can be no one but the son of Alan Arnold, and therefore the future ruler of Aeria, and the present or future possessor of the Great Secret. Do you see now why it is necessary that we should—well, I will say, make friends of those two handsome lads?"

Olga spoke rapidly and in Russian, a tongue then scarcely ever heard and very little understood even among educated people, who, whatever their nationality, made English their language of general intercourse. The words "handsome lads" had grated harshly upon Serge's ears, but he saw the force of Olga's question at once, and strove hard to stifle the waking demon of jealousy that had been roused more by her tone and the quick bright flush on her cheek than by her words, as he answered—

"Forgive me, darling, for speaking roughly! Their hundred years of peace have not tamed my Russian blood enough to let me look upon my enemies without anger. Of course, you are right; and if they are going by the express, as they seem to be, we should be friendly enough by the time we reach Königsberg."

"I am glad you agree with me," said Olga, "for the destinies of the world may turn on the events of the next few hours. Ah, the Fates are kind! Look! There is Alderman[1] Heatherstone talking to them. I suppose he has come to see them off, for no doubt they have been the guests of the City during the Festival. Come, he will very soon make us known to each other."

A couple of minutes later the Alderman, who had been an old friend of Paul Ivanitch, the famous sculptor, had cordially greeted them and introduced them to the two Aerians, whose names he gave as Alan Arnoldson, the son of the President of the late Supreme Council, and Alexis Masarov, a descendant of the Alexis Mazanoff who had played such a conspicuous part in the war of the Terror. They were just starting on the tour of the world, and were bound for St. Petersburg to witness the Winter Festival.

Olga had been more than justified in speaking of them as she had done. Both in face and form, they were the very ideal of youthful manhood. Both of them stood over six feet in the long, soft, white leather boots which rose above their knees, meeting their close-fitting, grey tunics of silk-embroidered cloth, confined at the waist by belts curiously fashioned of flat links of several different metals, and fastened in front by heavy buckles of gold studded with great, flashing gems.

From their broad shoulders hung travelling-cloaks of fine, blue cloth, lined with silver fur and kept in place across the breast by silver chains and clasps of a strange, blue metal, whose lustre seemed to come from within like that of a diamond or a sapphire.

On their heads they wore no other covering than their own thick, curling hair, which they wore somewhat in the picturesque style of the fourteenth century, and a plain, broad band of the gleaming blue metal, from which rose above the temples a pair of marvellously-chased, golden wings about four inches high—the insignia of the Empire of the Air, and the

[1] The good old word had now regained its ancient and uncorrupted meaning.

sign which distinguished the Aerians from all the other peoples of the earth.

As Olga shook hands with Alan, she looked up into his dark-blue eyes, with a glance such as he had never received from a woman before—a glance in which he seemed instinctively to read at once love and hate, frank admiration and equally undisguised defiance. Their eyes held each other for a moment of mutual fascination which neither could resist, and then the dark-fringed lids fell over hers, and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she replied to his words of salutation—

"Surely the pleasure will rather be on our side, with travelling companions from the other world! For my own part, I seem to remind myself somewhat of one of the daughters of men whom the Sons of the Gods"—

She stopped short in the middle of her daring speech, and looked up at him again as much as to say—

"So much for the present. Let the Fates finish it!" and then, appearing to correct himself, she went on, with a half-saucy, half-deprecating smile on her dangerously-mobile lips—

"You know what I mean; not exactly that, but something of the sort."

"More true, I fancy, of the daughter of men than of the supposed Sons of the Gods," retorted Alan, with a laugh, half startled by her words, and wholly charmed by the indescribable fascination of the way in which she said them; "for the daughters of men were so fair that the Sons of the Gods lost heaven itself for their sakes."

"Even so!" said Olga, looking him full in the eyes, and at that moment the signal sounded for them to take their places in the cars.

A couple of minutes after they had taken their seats, the train drew out of the station with an imperceptible, gliding motion, so smooth and frictionless that it seemed rather as though the people standing on the platform were sliding backwards than that the train was moving forward. The speed

increased rapidly, but so evenly that, almost before they were well aware of it, the passengers were flying over the snow-covered landscape, under the bright, heatless sun and pale, steel-blue sky of a perfect winter's morning, at a hundred miles an hour, the speed ever increasing as they sped onward.

The line followed the general direction of the present route to Dover, which was reached in about half an hour. Without pausing for a moment in its rapid flight, the express swept out from the land over the Channel Bridge, which spanned the Straits from Dover to Calais at a height of 200 feet above the water.

Travelling at a speed of three miles a minute, seven minutes sufficed for the express to leap, as it were, from land to land. As they swept along in mid-air over the waves, Olga pointed down to them and said to Alan, who was sitting in the arm-chair next her own—

"Imagine the time when people had to take a couple of hours getting across here in a little, dirty, smoky steamboat, mingling their sorrows and their sea-sickness in one common misery! I really think this Channel Bridge is worthy even of your admiration. Come now, you have not admired anything yet"—

"Pardon me," said Alan, with a look and a laugh that set Serge's teeth gritting against each other, and brought the ready blood to Olga's cheeks; "on the contrary, I have been absorbed in admiration ever since we started."

"But not apparently of our engineering triumphs," replied Olga frankly, taking the compliment to herself, and seeming in no way displeased with it. "It would seem that the polite art of flattery is studied to some purpose in Aeria."

"There you are quite wrong," returned Alan, still speaking in the same half-jocular, half-serious vein. "Before all things, we Aerians are taught to tell the absolute truth under all circumstances, no matter whether it pleases or offends; so, you see, what is usually known as flattery could hardly be one of our arts, since, as often as not, it is a lie told in the guise of

truth, for the sake of serving some hidden and perhaps dishonest end."

The blow so unconsciously delivered struck straight home, and the flush died from Olga's cheek, leaving her for the moment so white that her companion anxiously asked if she was unwell.

"No," she said, recovering her self-possession under the impulse of sudden anger at the weakness she had betrayed. "It is nothing. This is the first time for a year or so that I have travelled by one of these very fast trains, and the speed made me a little giddy just for the instant. I am quite well, really, so please go on.

"You know, that wonderful fairyland of yours is a subject of everlasting interest and curiosity to us poor outsiders who are denied a glimpse of its glories, and it is so very rarely that one of us enjoys the privilege that is mine just now, that I hope you will indulge my feminine curiosity as far as your good nature is able to temper your reserve."

As she uttered her request, Alan's smiling face suddenly became grave almost to sternness. The laughing light died out of his eyes, and she saw them darken in a fashion that at once convinced her that she had begun by making a serious mistake.

He looked up at her, with a shadow in his eyes and a slight frown on his brow. He spoke slowly and steadily, but with a manifest reluctance which he seemed to take little or no trouble to conceal.

"I am sorry that you have asked me to talk on what is a forbidden subject to every Aerian, save when he is speaking with one of his own nation. I see you have been looking at these two golden wings on the band round my head. I will tell you what they mean, and then you will understand why I cannot say all that I know you would like me to say.

"They are to us what the toga virilis was to the Romans of old, the insignia of manhood and responsibility. When a youth fo Aeria reaches the age of twenty he is entitled to wear these wings as a sign that he is invested with all the rights and duties of a citizen of the nation which has conquered and commands the Empire of the Air.

"One of these duties is, that in all the more serious relations of life he shall remain apart from all the peoples of the world save his own, and shall say nothing that will do anything to lift the veil which it has pleased our forefathers in their wisdom to draw round the realm of Aeria. Before we assume the citizenship of which these wings are the symbol we never visit the outside world save to make air voyages, for the purpose of learning the physical facts of the earth's shape and the geography of land and sea.

"Immediately after we have assumed it we do as Alexis and I are now doing—travel for a year or so through the different countries of the outside world, in order to get our knowledge of men and things as they exist beyond the limits of our own country.

"The fact that we do so,—under a pledge solemnly and publicly given, of never revealing anything which could lead even to a possibility of other peoples of the earth overtaking us in the progress which we have made in the arts and sciences, —is my excuse for refusing to tell you what your very natural curiosity has asked."

Olga saw instantly that she had struck a false note, and was not slow to make good her mistake. She laid her hand upon his arm, with that pretty gesture which Serge knew so well, and watched now with much bitter feelings, and said, in a tone that betrayed no trace of the consuming passion within her—

"Forgive me! Of course, you will see that I did not know I was trenching on forbidden grounds. I can well understand why such secrets as yours must be, should be kept. You have been masters of the world for more than a century, and even now, although you have formally abdicated the throne of the world, it would be absurd to deny that you still hold the destinies of humanity in your hands.

"The secrets which guard so tremendous a power as that may well be religiously kept and held more sacred than anything else on earth. Still, you have mistaken me if you thought I asked for any of these. All I really wanted was, that

you should tell me something that would give me just a glimpse of what human life is like in that enchanted land of yours"—

Alan laid his hands upon hers, which was still resting upon his arm, and interrupted her even more earnestly than before.

"Even that I cannot tell you. With us, the man who gives a pledge and breaks it, even in the spirit though not in the letter, is not considered worthy to live, and therefore I must be silent."

Instead of answering with her lips, Olga turned her hand palm upwards, and clasped his with a pressure which he returned before he very well knew what he was doing; and while the magic of her clasp was still stealing along his nerves, Serge broke in, with a harsh ring in his voice—

"But pardon me for interrupting what seems a very pleasant conversation with my—my sister, I should like to ask, with all due deference to the infinitely superior wisdom of the rulers of Aeria, whether it is not rather a risky thing for you to travel thus about the world, possessing secrets which any man or woman would almost be willing to die even to know for a few minutes, when, after all, you are but human even as the rest of humanity are?

"You, for instance, are only two among millions; how would you protect yourselves against the superior force of numbers? Supposing you were taken unawares under circumstances which make your superior knowledge unavailing. You know, human nature is the same yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow, despite the superficial varnish of civilisation.

"The passions of men are only curbed, not dead. There may be men on earth to-day who, to gain such knowledge as you possess, would even resort to the tortures used by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Suppose you found yourself in the power of such men as that, what then? Would you still preserve your secret intact, do you think?"

Alan heard him to the end without moving a muscle of his

face, and without even withdrawing his hand from Olga's clasp. But at the last sentence he snatched it suddenly away, half-turned in his seat, and faced him. Then, looking him straight in the eyes, he said in a tone as cold and measured as might have been used by a judge sentencing a criminal to death—

"We do not fear anything of the sort, simply because each one of us holds the power of life and death in his hands. If you laid a hand on me now in anger, or with an intent to do me harm, you would be struck dead before you could raise a finger in your own defence.

"Do you think that we, who are as far in advance of you as you are in advance of the men of a hundred years ago, would trust ourselves amongst those who might be our enemies were we not amply protected against you? Tell me, have you ever read a book, written nearly two hundred years ago in the Victorian Age, called *The Coming Race?*"

"Yes," said Serge, thinking, as he spoke, of the possibilities contained in the secret will of Paul Romanoff, "I have read it, and so has Olga. What of it?"

"Well," said Alan quietly, without moving his eyes from those of Serge. "I had better tell you at once that we have realised, to all intents and purposes, the dream that Lytton dreamt when he wrote that book. I can tell you so much without breaking the pledge of which I have spoken. All that the Vril-Ya did in his dream we have accomplished in reality, and more than that.

"Our empire is not bounded by the roofs of subterranean caverns, but only by the limits of the planet's atmosphere. We can soar beyond the clouds and dive beneath the seas. We have realised what he called the Vril force as a sober, scientific fact; and if I thought that you, for instance, were my enemy, I could strike you dead without so much as laying a hand on you. And if a dozen like you tried to overcome me by superior brute force, they would all meet with the same fate.

"I'm afraid this sounds somewhat like boasting," he con-

tinued in a more gentle tone, and dropping his eyes to the floor of the car, "but the turn the conversation has taken obliged me to say what I have done. Suppose we give it another turn and change the subject. We have unintentionally got upon rather uncomfortable ground."

Serge and Olga were not slow to take the pointed hint, and of the talk drifted into general and more harmless channels.

CHAPTER V.

A VISION FROM THE CLOUDS.

AT Königsberg, which was reached in nine hours after leaving London, that is to say, soon after seven o'clock in the evening, the Eastern express divided: five of the cars went northward to St. Petersburg, carrying those passengers who were going to participate in the Winter Festival, while the other five which made up the train went on to Moscow and the East.

During the twenty minutes' stop at Berlin, Olga had found an opportunity of having a few words in private with Serge, and had succeeded in persuading him, much against his will, of the necessity of postponing their marriage, and therefore their visit to Moscow, for the execution of a daring and suddenly-conceived plan which she had thought out, but which she had then no time to explain to him.

Serge, though very loath to postpone even for a day or two the consummation of his hopes and the hour which should make Olga irrevocably his, so far as human laws could bind her to him, was so far under the domination of her imperious will that, as soon as he saw that she had determined to have her own way, he yielded with the best grace he could.

Olga chided him gently and yet earnestly for his outbreak of temper towards Alan, and told him plainly that, where such tremendous issues were concerned as those which were involved in the struggle which sooner or later they must wage with the Aerians, no personal considerations whatever could be permitted

a moment's serious thought. If she could sacrifice her own feelings, and disguise her hatred of the tyrants of the world under the mask of friendliness, for the sake of the ends to which both their lives were devoted, surely he, if he were at all worthy of her love, could so far trust her as to restrain the unreasoning jealousy of which he had already been guilty.

Either, she told him, he must trust to her absolutely for the present, or he must take the management of affairs into his own hands; and, as she said in conclusion, he must find some influence stronger than hers in their dealings with him who would one day be the ruler of Aeria, and, therefore, the real master of the world, should it ever be possible to dispute the empire of Earth with the Aerians.

From the influence which she exercised over himself, Serge knew only too well that he could not hope to rival her in this regard where a man was concerned, and so he perforce agreed to her proposal, and for the present left the conduct of affairs in her hands.

A telephonic message was therefore sent from Königsberg to the friends who expected them at Vorobiévŏ, near Moscow, to tell them of the change in their plans; and when the train once more glided out over the frozen plains of the North, the four were once more seated together in the brilliantly-lighted car, which flashed like a meteor through the gathering darkness of the winter's night.

About half an hour after they had passed what had once been the jealously-guarded Russian frontier, a dazzling gleam of light suddenly blazed down from the black darkness overhead, and Olga, who was sitting by one of the windows of the car, bent forward and said—

"Look there! What is that? There is a bright light shining down out of the clouds on the train."

Alan saw the flash across the window, and, without even troubling to look up at its source, said—

"Oh, I suppose that'll be the air-ship that was ordered to meet us at St. Petersburg. You know, we usually have one of

them in attendance, when we trust ourselves alone among our possible enemies of the outer world."

The last sentence was spoken with a quiet irony, which brought home both to Olga and Serge the not very pleasant conviction that their previous conversation had by no means been forgotten. Serge, perhaps fearing to give utterance to his thoughts, remained silent, but Olga looked at Alan with a half-saucy smile, and said almost mockingly—

"Your Majesties of Aeria may well esteem yourselves impregnable, while you have such a bodyguard as that at your beck and call. I suppose that air-ship would not have the slightest difficulty in blowing this train, and all it contains, off the face of the earth at a moment's notice, if it had orders to do so?"

"Not the slightest," said Alan quietly. "But in proof of the fact that it has no such hostile intentions, you shall, if you please, take a voyage beyond the clouds in it the day after to-morrow, from St. Petersburg."

"What!" said Olga, her cheeks flushing and her eyes lighting up at the very idea of such an experience. "Do you really mean to say that you would permit a daughter of the earth, as I am told you call the women who have not the good fortune to be born in Aeria, to go on board one of those wonderful air-ships of yours, and taste the forbidden delights of spurning the earth and sharing, even for an hour, your Empire of the Air?"

"Why not?" replied Alan, with a laugh. "What harm would be done by taking you for a trip beyond the clouds? We are not so selfish as all that; and if the novel experience would give you any pleasure, we have a perfect right to ask you to enjoy it. Will you come?"

"Surely there is scarcely any need for me to say 'yes.' Why, do you know, I believe I would give five years of my life for as many hours on board that air-ship of yours," said Olga; "and if you will do as you say, you will make me your debtor for ever. Indeed, how could a poor earth-dweller such as I am repay a favour like that."

"Ah, if only you were an Aerian, I should not have much

difficulty in telling you how you could do that," retorted Alan, with almost boyish candour. "As it is, I am afraid I must be satisfied for my reward with the pleasure of knowing that I have given you a pleasurable experience."

"Your Majesty has put that so prettily, that it almost atones for the sense of hopeless inferiority which, I need hardly tell you, is just a trifle bitter to my feminine pride," said Olga, in the same half-bantering tone she had used all along.

Before a reply had risen to Alan's lips, the conversation was interrupted by the air-ship suddenly swooping down from the clouds to the level of the windows of the train, which was now flying along over a wide, treeless plain at a speed of fully two hundred miles an hour.

As the search-lights of the aerial vessel flashed along the windows of the cars, the blinds, which had been drawn down at nightfall, were sprung up again by the passengers, who were all eager to get a glimpse of one of the marvellous vessels which so rarely came within close view of the dwellers upon earth.

The air-ship, on which all eyes were now bent with such intense curiosity, was a beautifully-proportioned vessel, built chiefly of some unknown metal, which shone with a brilliant, pale-blue lustre. Her hull was about two hundred feet from stem to stern, not counting a long, ramlike projection which stretched some twenty-five feet in front of the stem, with its point level with the keel, or rather, with the three keels,—the centre one shallow and the two others very deep,—which were obviously shaped so as to enable the craft either to stand upright on land or to sail upon the water if desired.

From each of her sides spread out two great wings, not unlike palm-leaves in shape, measuring some hundred feet from point to point, and about twice the width of the vessel's deck, which was, as nearly as could be judged, twenty feet amidships.

These wings were made of some white, lustrous material, which shone with a somewhat more metallic sheen than silk would have done, and were divided into a vast number of sections by transverse ribs. These sections vibrated and undulated rhythmically from front to rear with enormous

rapidity, and evidently not only sustained the vessel in the air, but also aided in her propulsion.

Three seemingly solid discs, which glittered brilliantly in the light from the train, marked the positions of the air-ship's propellers, of which one revolved on a shaft in a straight line with the centre of the deck, while the shafts of the other two were inclined outwards at a slight angle from the middle line. From the deck rose three slender, raking masts, apparently placed there for ornament rather than use, unless indeed they were employed for signalling purposes.

The whole deck was covered completely from end to end by a curved roof of glass, and formed a spacious chamber pervaded by a soft, diffused light, the origin of which was invisible, and which showed about half a dozen figures clad in the graceful costume of the Aerians, and all wearing the headdress with golden wings. From under the domed, crystal roof projected ten long, slender guns,—two over the bows, two over the stern, and three over each side, at equal intervals.

Such was the wonderful craft which swept down from the darkness of the wintry sky, in full view of the passengers in the cars, and lighted up the snowy landscape for three or four miles ahead and astern with the dazzling rays of her two search-lights.

Although, as has been said, the express was moving at quite two hundred miles an hour, the air-ship swept up alongside it with as much apparent ease as though it had been stationary. Amid the murmurs of irrepressible admiration which greeted it from the passengers, it glided smoothly nearer and nearer, until the side of one of its wings was within ten feet of the car windows.

Alan and Alexis stood up and saluted their comrades on the deck, then a few rapid, unintelligible signals made with the hand passed between them, a parting salute was waved from the air-ship to the express; and then, with a speed that seemed to rival that of the lightning-bolt, the cruiser of the air darted forward and upward, and in ten seconds was lost beyond the clouds.

"Well, now that you have seen one of our aerial fleet at

close quarters," said Alan, turning to Olga and Serge, "what do you think of her?"

"A miracle!" they both exclaimed in one breath; and then Olga went on, her voice trembling with an irresistible agitation—

"I can hardly believe that such a marvel is the creation of merely human genius. There is something appalling in the very idea of the awful power lying in the hands of those who can create and command such a vessel as that. You Aerians may well look down on us poor earth-dwellers, for truly you have made yourselves as gods."

She spoke earnestly, and for once with absolute honesty, for the vision of the air-ship had awed her completely for the time being. Alan appeared for the moment as a god in her eyes, until she saw his lips curve in a very human smile, and heard his voice say, without the slightest assumption of superiority in its tone—

"No, not as gods; but only as men who have developed under the most favourable circumstances possible, and who have known how to make the best of their advantages."

"God or man," said Olga in her soul, while her lips were smiling acknowledgment of his modesty, "by this time to-morrow you shall be my slave, and I will be mistress both of you and your air-ship!"

CHAPTER VI.

DEED AND DREAM.

WHEN Olga went to her room that night in St. Petersburg, instead of going to bed, she unpacked from her valise a series of articles which seemed strange possessions for a young girl of not quite seventeen to travel with on her wedding journey.

First came a tiny spirit furnace from which, by the aid of an arrangement something like the modern blow-pipe, an intense heat could be obtained. Then a delicate pair of scales, a glass pestle and mortar, and a couple of glass liquid-measures, and lastly, half a dozen little phials filled with variously-coloured liquids, and as many little packets of powders, that looked like herbs ground very finely.

When she had placed these out on the table, after having carefully locked the door of her room, and seen that the windows were completely shuttered and curtained, she drew from the bosom of her dress a gold chain, at the end of which was fastened, together with the key of the secret recess in the wall of the turret chamber of the house at Hampstead, a small bag of silk, out of which she took a little roll of parchment,—the slip which she had abstracted from Paul Romanoff's secret will after she had persuaded Serge, with her false kisses, to leave her alone for a while.

She seated herself at the table, drew the electric reading-lamp which stood on it close to her, laid the slip down in front of her, keeping it unrolled by means of a couple of little

weights, and studied it intently for several minutes. Then she made a series of calculations on another sheet of paper, and compared the result carefully with some figures on the slip.

She made them three times over before she was satisfied that they were absolutely correct, and then, with all the care and deliberation of a chemical analyst performing a delicate and important experiment, she proceeded to weigh out tiny quantities of the powders, and to mix them very carefully in the little glass mortar. This done, she emptied the mixture into a little platinum crucible, which she placed on the furnace, at the same time applying a gentle heat.

Then she turned her attention to the phials, measuring off quantities of their contents with the most scrupulous exactitude, mixing them two and two, and adding this mixture to a third, and so on, in a certain order which was evidently prearranged, as she constantly referred to the slip of parchment and her own calculations as she was mixing them.

By the time she finished this part of her work, she had obtained from the various coloured liquids one perfectly colourless and odourless, of a specific gravity apparently considerably in excess of that of water, although, at the same time, it was extremely mobile and refractive. She held it up to the light, looking at it with her eyelids somewhat screwed up, and with a cruel smile on her pretty lips.

"So far, so good," she said in a voice little higher than a whisper. "The lives of fifty strong men in that couple of ounces of harmless looking fluid! If anyone could see me just now, I fancy they would take me rather for a witch or a poisoner of the fifteenth century than for a girl of the twenty-first.

"Well, my friend Alan, your mysterious power may kill more quickly, but not more surely than this; and this, too, will take a man out of the world so easily that not even he himself will know that he is going,—not even when he sinks into the sleep from which he will awake on the other side of the shadows.

"So much for the bodies of our enemies, and now for their souls! I don't want to kill wholesale, at least, not just yet; and as for you, my Alan, you are far too splendid, too glorious a man to be killed, to say nothing of your being so much more useful alive. No, I have a very much pleasanter fate in store for you."

Just then a little cloud as of incense smoke began to rise from the crucible in which were the mixed powders, and a faint, pleasant perfume began to diffuse itself. She stopped her soliloquy, measured off exactly half of the liquid, and patiently poured it, drop by drop, into the crucible, at the same time gradually increasing the heat.

The vapour gradually disappeared, and the perfume died away. When she had poured in the last drop, she began slowly stirring the mixture with a glass rod. It gradually assumed the consistency of thick syrup, and after stirring it for three minutes by her watch, which lay on the table beside her, she extinguished the electric lamp and waited.

In a few seconds a pale, orange-coloured flame appeared hovering over the crucible. As its ghostly light fell upon her anxious features, she caught sight of herself in a mirror let into the wall on the opposite side of the table. She started back in her chair with an irrepressible shudder. For the first time in her life she saw herself as she really was.

The weird, unearthly light of the flame changed the clear, pale olive of her skin into a sallow red, and cast what looked like a mist of vapour tinged with blood across the dark lustre of her dusky eyes. It seemed as though the light that she had called forth from the darkness had melted the beautiful mask which hid her inner self from the eyes of men, and revealed her naked soul incarnate in the evil shape that should have belonged to it.

Suddenly the flame vanished, she turned on the switch of the lamp, placed a platinum cover over the crucible with a pair of light, curved tongs, and, with a quick half-turn, screwed it hermetically down. Then she turned the heat of the furnace on to the full, rose from her chair, and stretched herself, with

her linked hands above her head, till her lithe, girlish form was drawn up to its full height in front of the mirror.

She looked dreamily from under her half-closed lids at the perfect picture presented by the reflection, and then her tightly-closed lips melted into a smile, and she said softly to herself—

"Ah, that is a different sort of picture. I wonder what Alan would have thought if he could have seen *that* one? I don't think I should have taken my trip in the air-ship to-morrow if he had done. Well, I have seen myself as I am—what four generations of inherited hate and longing for revenge have made me.

"In the light of that horrible flame I might have sat for the portrait of the lost soul of Lucrezia Borghia. Ah, well, if mine is lost, it shall be lost for something worth the exchange. 'Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven,' as old Milton said, and after all—who knows?

"Bah! that is enough of dreaming, when the time for doing is so near. I must get some sleep to-night, or my eyes will have lost some of their brightness by to-morrow."

So saying, she busied herself putting away her phials, and powders, and apparatus. The half of the colourless liquid she had left she carefully decanted into a tiny flask, over the stopper of which she screwed a silver cap that had a little ring on the top, and this she hung on the chain round her neck. She replaced the slip of parchment in its silken bag, and carefully burnt the paper on which she had made her calculations.

By this time the bottom of the crucible was glowing red hot. She noted the time that had elapsed since she had screwed the cap down, waited five minutes longer, and then extinguished the furnace, undressed, and got into bed, and in half an hour was sleeping as quietly as a little child. She had set the chime of her repeating watch to sound at six, and hung the watch close above her head.

Calm as her sleep was at first, it was by no means dreamless, and her dreams were well fitted to be those of a guilty soul slumbering after a work of death.

As she gazed upon it, the Fires died away. *Page 57.*

She saw herself standing with Alan on the glass-domed deck of the air-ship, beneath the light of a clear, white moon sailing high in the heavens, and a host of brilliant stars glittering out of the deep-blue depths beyond it. Far below them lay an unbroken cloud-sea of dazzling whiteness, which stretched away into the infinite distance on all sides, until it seemed to blend with the moonlight and melt into the sky.

Then the scene changed, and the air-ship swept downwards in a wide, spiral curve, and plunged through the noiseless billows of the shadowy sea. As she did so, a fearful chorus of sounds rose up from the earth below.

The moonlight and starlight were gone, and in their place the lurid glare of burning cities and blazing forests cast a fearful radiance up through the great eddying waves of smoke, and reflected itself on the under surface of the clouds; now the air-ship swept hither and thither with bewildering rapidity, like the incarnation of some fearful spirit of destruction. Alan had vanished, and she was giving orders rapidly, and men were working the long, slender guns in a grim silence that contrasted weirdly with the horrible din that rose from the earth.

She saw neither smoke nor flame from the guns, nor heard any sound as they were discharged, but every time she raised her hand, the motion was followed within a few seconds by a shaking of the atmosphere, a dull roar from the earth, and the outburst of vast, dazzling masses of flame, before which the blaze of the conflagration paled.

She looked down with fierce exultation upon the scene of carnage and destruction; and as she gazed upon it, the fires died away, the roar of the explosions began to sound like echoes in the distance, and when the landscape of her dream-land took definite shape again, the air-ship was hovering over a vast, oval valley, walled in by mighty mountain masses, surmounted by towering peaks, on some of which crests of everlasting snow and ice shone undissolved in the rays of the tropical sun.

The valley itself was of such incomparable and fairy-like beauty, that it seemed to belong rather to the realm of

imagination than to the world of reality. A great lake lay in the centre, its emerald shores lined with groves of palms and orange-trees, and fringed with verdant islets spangled with many coloured flowers.

On the northern shore of the lake lay a splendid city of marble palaces, surrounded by shady gardens, and divided from each other by broad, straight streets, smooth as ivory and spotless as snow, and lined with double rows of wide-spreading trees, which cast a pleasant shade along their sides.

In the midst of a vast square, in the centre of the city, rose an immense building of marble of perfect whiteness, surmounted by a great golden dome, which in turn was crowned by the silver shape of a woman with great spreading wings, which blazed and scintillated in the sunlight as though they had been fashioned of sheets of crystal, pure and translucent as diamonds.

All over the valley, villas and palaces of marble were scattered in cool ravines and on shaded, wooded slopes; and as far as her eye could reach, vast expanses of garden land, emerald pastures, and golden corn fields stretched away over hill and vale, until the most remote were met by the cool, dark forests which clothed the middle slopes of the all-encircling mountains, and themselves gave place higher up to dark, frowning precipices, vast walls of living rock, rising thousands of feet sheer upwards, and ending in the mighty peaks which stood like eternal sentinels guarding this enchanted realm.

If she had had her will, she would have gazed for ever upon this delightful scene; but the spirit of the dream was not to be controlled, and it faded from her sight just as the picture of death and desolation had done. As it faded away, Alan, who had now come back to her side, laid his hand upon her shoulder, and, looking at her with mournful eyes, said wearily—

"That was your first and last glimpse of heaven. Now comes the judgment!"

As he spoke, the air-ship soared upwards again, and was instantly enveloped in a cloud of impenetrable darkness. She

sped on and on in utter silence through the gloom, which was so dense that it seemed to cast the rays of the ship's electric lights back upon her as she floated amidst it. Presently the deathlike silence was broken by a low, weird sound, that seemed like a wail of universal agony rising up from the earth beneath.

Then, far ahead and high up in the sky, appeared a faint light, which grew and brightened until the darkness melted away before it; and Olga saw the air-ship floating near enough to the earth for her to see that all its vegetation was withered and yellow, and the beds of its streams almost dry, with only little, thin rivulets trickling sluggishly along them.

Millions of people seemed wandering listlessly and aimlessly about the streets of the cities and the parched fields of the open country, ever and anon stretching their hands as though in appeal up to the dark, moonless sky, in which the fearful shape of light and fiery mist was growing every moment brighter and vaster.

It grew and grew until it arched half the horizon with its tremendous curve; and then out of the midst of it came a huge, dazzling globe of fire, from the rim of which shot forth great flames of every colour, some of which seemed to descend to the surface of the earth like long fiery tongues that licked up the seething lakes in wreathing clouds of steam, which hissed and roared as they rose like ascending cataracts.

She looked down between them at the earth. The myriads of figures were there still, but now they lay prone and lifeless on the ground, as though the last agony of mankind were past. The light of the blazing globe grew more and more dazzling, and the heat more and more intense. The speed of the air-ship slackened visibly, although the wings and propellers were working at their utmost speed, and it was falling rapidly, as though there was no longer any air to support it.

She gasped for breath in the choking, burning atmosphere of the deck chamber, and then a swift, vivid wave of light seemed to sweep through her brain, and she woke with a choking gasp of terror, with the chimes of her watch ringing

sweetly in her ears, telling her that the vision had been but a dream of a night that had passed.

Wide awake in an instant, she got out of bed and turned on the electric lamp. As the room had been perfectly warmed all night by the electric conduction-stoves, which were then in almost universal use, she only stopped to throw a fur-lined cloak round her shoulders before she went to remove the cap of the crucible.

She peered anxiously into the vessel, and saw about two fluid ounces of a dark, glittering liquid, from the surface of which the light of the lamp was reflected as though from a mirror. With hands that trembled slightly, in spite of the great effort she made to keep her nerves in check, she poured the precious fluid into one of the glass measures that she had used the night before.

Seen through the glass, its colour was a deep, brilliant blue, and, like the white liquid first prepared, shone as though with an inherent, light-giving power of its own. She held it up admiringly to the light, and said to herself, with the same cruel smile that had curved her lips when she had contemplated the other fluid—

"How beautiful it is! It might be made of sapphires dissolved in some potent essence. In reality, it is an elixir capable of dissolving the souls of men. Ah, my proud Masters of the World, we shall soon see how much your boasted powers avail you against this and a woman's wit and hatred!

"And you, my splendid Alan, before to-morrow night you shall be at my feet! Two drops of this, and that proud, strong soul of yours shall melt away like a snowflake under warm rain, and you shall be my slave and do my bidding, and never know that you are not as free as you are now.

"The days have gone by when men sought the Elixir of Life, but Paul Romanoff sought and found the Elixir of Death,—death of the body or of the soul, as the possessor of it shall will; and he is gone, and I, alone of all the children of men, possess it!"[1]

[1] Such a poison as this is no figment of the imagination. It has been known to Oriental adepts in poisoning for many centuries, and the Borghias

She set the measure down on the table, and took out of her valise a similar little flask to the one which held the white liquid. In this she carefully poured the contents of the measure, screwed the cap on as before, and hung it with the other on the chain round her neck. Then, woman-like, she turned to the mirror, threw back her cloak a little, and gazed at the reflection of the two flasks, which shone like two great gems upon her white skin.

"There is such a necklace as woman never wore before, since woman first delighted in gems,—a necklace that all the jewels in the world could not buy. How pretty they look!"

So saying, she turned away from the mirror and carefully put away all traces of the work she had been engaged in, then she threw off her cloak and turned the lamp out and got into bed again, to wait until the attendant called her at eight o'clock as she had directed.

She did not go to sleep again, but lay with wide-open eyes looking at the darkness, and conjuring out of it visions of love and war, and the world-wide empire which she believed to be now almost within her grasp. In all these visions, two figures stood out prominently—those of Serge and Alan, her lover that had been and the lover that was to be,—if only the elixir did its work as its discoverer had said it would.

As such thoughts as these passed through her brain, a new and perhaps a nobler conception of her mission of revenge took possession of her. In the past, Natasha had won the love of the man whose genius had made possible, nay, irresistible, the triumph of that revolution which had subverted the throne of her ancestors, and sent the last of the Tsars of Russia to die like a felon in chains amidst the snows of Siberia.

What more magnificent vengeance could she, the last surviving daughter of the Romanoffs, win than the enslavement of the man descended not only from Natasha and

were certainly familiar with it. A kindred drug was used by the Russian agents who kidnapped the late Prince Alexander of Bulgaria, though in his case the injury was permanent. It reduced him from one of the most able and daring princes in Europe to a mental and moral cripple, who was perfectly content to live in the obscurity to which his enemies had consigned him.

Richard Arnold, but also from that Alan Tremayne whose name he bore, and who, as first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, had ensured the victory of the Western races over the Eastern?

The empire of freedom and peace, which Richard Arnold had won for Natasha's sake, this son of the line of Natas should convert, at her bidding, into an empire such as she longed to rule over,—an empire in which men should be her slaves and women her handmaidens. For her sake the wave of Destiny should flow back again; she would be the Semiramis of a new despotism.

What was the freedom or the happiness of the mass of mankind to her? If she could raise herself above them, and put her foot upon their necks, why should she not do so? By force the leaders of the Terror had overthrown the despotisms of the Old World; why should not she employ the self-same force to seat herself, with the man she loved in spite of all her hereditary hatred, upon the throne of the world, and reign with him in that glorious land whose beauties had been revealed to her in the vision which surely had been something more than a dream?

Thus thinking and dreaming, and illumining the darkness with her own visions of glories to come, she lay in a kind of ecstasy, until a knock at the door warned her that the time for dreaming had passed and the hour for action had arrived.

A brief half-hour sufficed for her toilet, and she entered the room of the hotel, in which Serge was awaiting her, dressed to perfection in her plain, clinging robe of royal purple, and self-composed as though she had passed the night in the most innocent and dreamless of slumbers. She submitted to his greeting kiss with as good a grace as possible, and yet with an inward shrinking which almost amounted to loathing, born of the visions which were still floating in her mind.

She shuddered almost invisibly as he released her from his embrace, and then the bright blood rose to her cheeks, and a sudden light shone in her eyes, as the thought possessed her, that not many hours would pass before a far nobler lover would

take her in his arms, and would press sweeter kisses upon her lips,—the lips which had sworn fealty and devotion to the enemies of his race.

Serge, with the true egotism of the lover, took the blush to himself, and said, with a laugh of boyish frankness—

"Travelling and Russian air seem to agree with your Majesty. Evidently you have slept well your first night on Russian soil. I was half afraid that what happened yesterday, and your conversation with that golden-winged braggart from Aeria, would have sufficiently disturbed you to give you a more or less sleepless night, but you look as fresh and as lovely as though you had slept in the most perfect peace at home."

The anger that these unthinking words awoke in her soul, brought back the bright flush to Olga's cheeks and the light into her eyes, and again Serge mistook the sign, as indeed he might well have done; and so he entirely mistook the meaning of her words when she replied, with a laugh, of the true significance of which he had not the remotest conception—

"On the contrary, how was it possible that I could have anything but the sweetest sleep and the most pleasant dreams, after such a delightful journey and the making of such pleasant acquaintances? Do you not think the Fates have favoured us beyond our wildest expectations, in thus bringing our enemies so unconsciously across our path at the very outset of our campaign against them?

"But really, these Aerians are delightful fellows. No, don't frown at me like that, because you know as well as I do, that in that chivalrous good-nature of theirs lies our best hope of success."

As she spoke she went up to him, and laid her two hands upon his shoulder, and went on looking up into his eyes with a seductive softness in hers.

"I am afraid I made you terribly jealous yesterday; but really, Serge, you must remember that in diplomacy, and diplomacy alone, lies our only chance of advantage in the circumstances which the kindly Fates appear to have specially created for our benefit.

"The time for you to act will come later on, and when it comes, I know you will acquit yourself like the true Romanoff that you are; but for the present—well, you know these Aerians are men, and where diplomacy alone is in the question, it is better that a woman should deal with them. You will trust me for the present,—won't you, Serge?"

For all answer, he took her face between his hands, put her head back, and kissed her, saying as he released her—

"Yes, darling; I will trust you not only now, but for ever. You are wiser than I am in these things. Do as you please; I will obey."

As he spoke, the door opened, and an attendant came in with two little cups of coffee on a silver salver. He placed it on the table, told them that breakfast would be ready for them in the morning-room in ten minutes, and retired. As they sipped their coffee, Olga said to Serge—

"Now, we shall meet our enemies at breakfast, and I want you to be a great deal more cordial and friendly than you were yesterday. Our own feelings concern ourselves alone, but in our outward conduct we owe something to the sacred cause which we both have at heart. You can imagine how great a sacrifice I am making in my relations with those whom I have been taught to hate from my cradle.

"I can see as well as you do, perhaps better, that this future ruler of Aeria admires me in his own boyish way. If I can bring myself to appear complaisant, surely it is not too much to ask you to look upon it with indifference, or even with interest,—a brotherly interest, you know; for you must remember that he knows me only as your sister.

"Now, I want you to ask them to come and have breakfast with us at our table, and to exert yourself to appear agreeable to them, even as I shall; and above all things, promise me that you will fall in with any suggestions that I may make as regards our trip in this wonderful air-ship which we are to make to-morrow.

"There is no time now to explain to you what I mean, but I swear to you, by the blood that flows in both our veins, that

if I can only carry through, without any let or hindrance, the plans that I have already formed—that before forty-eight hours have passed that air-ship shall no longer be under Alan Arnoldson's command."

He looked at her for a moment with almost incredulous admiration. She returned his inquiring glance with a steady, unwavering gaze, which made suspicion impossible. All his life he had grown up to look upon her as sharing with him the one hope that was left of restoring the ancient fortunes of their family. More than this they had been lovers ever since either of them knew the meaning of love.

How then could he have dreamt that behind so fair an appearance lay as dark and treacherous a design as the brain of an ambitious woman had ever conceived? Intoxicated by her beauty and the memory of his lifelong love, he took a couple of steps towards her, took her unresisting into his arms again, and said passionately—

"Give me another kiss, darling, and on your lips I will swear to trust you always and do your bidding even to the death."

She returned his kiss with a passion so admirably simulated that his resolve was thrice strengthened by it, and then she released herself gently from his embrace, saying—

"Even so, unto the death if needs be,—as I shall serve our sacred cause to the end, cost what it may! Come, it is time that we went down to breakfast."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SPELL OF CIRCE

BREAKFAST passed off very pleasantly, and by the time it was over Serge was upon much better terms with the two Aerians than he had been on the previous day. He had taken Olga's warning and appeal to heart, and he had done so all the more easily for the reason that he felt somewhat ashamed of himself for the ill-temper and bad manners of which he had been guilty, and which their two new acquaintances had repaid with such dignified courtesy and good humour.

His frankly-expressed apology was accepted with such perfect good nature, unmixed with even a suspicion of condescension, that he felt at ease with them at once, and even began to regret that his destiny made it impossible for him to be their friend instead of their enemy.

The discussion of their plans for the day occupied the rest of the meal. They had a whole twenty-four hours before them, for the *Ithuriel* would not be back from San Francisco, where she was going when she passed the train, until ten o'clock on the following morning, so it was arranged that they would begin the day with a sleigh drive—a luxury which not even Aeria could afford,—then the two Aerians were to see the sights of the city under the guidance of Olga and Serge, and perform the chief of the duties that brought them to St. Petersburg.

After luncheon they were to have a couple of hours on the

ice in the park, into which the Yusupoff Gardens of the nineteenth century had been expanded, after which they would see the ice palaces illuminated at dusk, then dine, and finish the day at the opera. When the air-ship arrived, a rapid flight was to be taken across Europe over the Alps and back to Moscow, across Italy, Greece, and the Black Sea, which would enable Alan and Alexis to deposit their guests with their Moscow friends soon after nightfall.

The sleigh drive took the form of a race, on the plain stretching towards Lake Ladoga, between the two troikas driven by Serge and Olga, who had so managed matters that she had Alan for a companion, and who, not a little to Serge's disgust, won it, after a desperate struggle, by a head. The race was a revelation to the two Aerians, and when Alan handed Olga out of the sleigh after they had trotted quietly back to the city, the interest which she had excited in him during the railway journey had already begun to deepen into a sentiment much more pleasing and dangerous.

The rest of the morning was devoted to driving about the city, and to paying a visit to the ancient fortress of Peter and Paul, which alone of all the fortress prisons of Russia had been preserved intact as a fitting monument of fallen despotism and a warning to all future generations. Once at least in his life every man in Aeria visited this fortress, as good Moslems visit Mecca, and this was the duty which Alan and Alexis were now performing.

In one of the horrible dungeons deep down in the foundations of the fortress, under the waters of the Neva, they were shown a massive gold plate riveted on to the rough, damp, stone wall. Its surface was kept brightly polished, and it looked strangely incongruous with the gloom and squalor of the cell. On it stood an inscription in platinum letters let into the gold:

"*In this cell Israel di Mursha, afterwards known as Natas, the Master of the Terror, was imprisoned in the year* 1881, *previous to his exile to Siberia by order of Alexander Romanoff the last of the Tyrants of Russia.*"

With feelings wide asunder as love and hate, or gratitude and revenge, the descendant of Natas and the daughter of the Romanoffs stood in front of this memorial plate, and read the simple and yet pregnant words. Alan and Alexis both bent their heads as if in reverence for a moment, but Olga and Serge gazed at it with heads erect and eyes glowing with the fires of anger, in a silence that was broken by Alan saying—

"Liberty surely never had a stranger temple than this, and yet this dungeon is to us what the Tomb of the Prophet is to the Moslems. I wonder what the Last of the Tsars would have thought if he could have foreseen even a little part of all that sprang from the tragedy that was begun in this dismal cell?"

"He would have killed him," said Olga, carried away for the moment by an irrepressible burst of passion, "and then there would have been no Natas, no Terror, and no Terrorist air-fleet, and Alexander Romanoff would have died master of the world instead of a chained felon in Siberia! Your ancestor, Richard Arnold, would have starved in his garret, or killed himself in despair, as many other geniuses did before him, and"—

"And the world would have remained the slave-market of tyrants and the shambles of murderous men. Let us thank God that Natas lived to do his work!" said Alan in a tone of solemn reverence, wondering not a little at Olga's strange outburst, and yet not having the remotest idea of its true cause.

Neither Olga nor Serge could reply to this speech. They would have bitten their tongues through rather than say "Amen" to it, and anything else they dare not have said. After a moment more of somewhat constrained silence, Olga turned towards the door and said—

"Come! Let us go, the air of this place poisons me!"

When they got on the ice after lunch, Olga was not a little astonished to find that, perfect as she and Serge were in skating, the two Aerians were little inferior to them, despite the fact that they had just left their tropical home for the first time.

"How is this?" said Olga to Alan, as, hand in hand, they went sweeping over the ice in long, easy curves. "I suppose you manufacture your ice for skating purposes in Aeria?"

"No," he said. "Some of our mountains rise above the snow-line, and in their upper valleys they have little lakes, so, when we want a skating surface, we just pump the water up and flood them and let it freeze. Besides this—I don't think there is any harm in my telling you that we have a sort of wheel-skate which runs quite as easily as steel does on ice."

"Ah," said Olga, possessed by a sudden thought. "Then I suppose that is why the streets of your splendid city are so broad, and white, and smooth?"

Quietly as the words were spoken, Alan's hand tightened upon hers as he heard them with a grip that almost made her cry out with pain. It was some moments before he recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to ask her the meaning of her unexpected and amazing question. She greeted his question with a saucy smile and a mocking, upward glance, and said quietly—

"Simply because I have seen them!"

It was a bow drawn at a venture. She had suddenly determined to test the truth of her vision and hazard a description from it of the unknown land.

"You have seen them?" cried Alan, now more amazed than ever. "But, pardon me, even at the risk of contradicting you I must tell you that that is impossible. No one not a born Aerian has set eyes on Aeria for more than a hundred years."

"So you think perhaps," she said in the same quiet, half-mocking tone. "Well now, listen and tell me whether this description is entirely incorrect. If it is correct you need say nothing, if it is not you can tell me so."

And then she began, while he listened in a silence of utter stupefaction, and described the valley and city of Aeria as she had seen them in her dream-vision. When she had finished he was silent for several moments, and then said in a voice that told her that she had really seen it as though with the eyes of flesh—

"What are you? A sorceress, or— No, you cannot be an Aerian girl in disguise, for none ever leaves the country till she is married."

"Then as I cannot be the latter," said Olga, "you must, I suppose, consider me the former. Now I shall take my revenge for your reticence in the train yesterday, and tell you no more. We are quits to that extent at least, and now we will go back to my brother, if you please."

With this Alan was forced to be content. Indeed, he could not have pursued the subject without breaking his oath, and so a few minutes later it came about that Olga and Serge were skating together in an unfrequented part of the lake, and here Olga took an opportunity that she might not have again of telling him as much as she thought fit for him to know of her plans for capturing the air-ship on the following day.

"I needn't tell you," said she, "that this air-ship is worth everything to us, and that therefore we must be ready to go to any extremities to get possession of it. It is the first step to the command of the world, for you heard Alan say to-day that she is the swiftest vessel in the whole Aerian fleet."

"But to do that we must first overcome the crew," said Serge, looking anxiously about to see if there was anyone within earshot. "How are we going to do that—two of us against ten or a dozen, armed with powers we know nothing about?"

"We must find means to drug them—to poison them, if necessary, during to-morrow's voyage," came the reply, in a whisper that made his heart stand still for the moment with utter horror.

"Good God! is that really necessary? It seems a horrible thing to do, when they are trusting us and taking us as their guests," he said in a low, trembling tone.

"Yes," she replied, with a well simulated shudder; "it is horrible, I know, but it is necessary. Remember that we have solemnly sworn war to the knife against this people, and that, armed as they are, all open assault is impossible; therefore they must be struck in secret, or not at all.

"Now listen. I have brought with me a flask which my grandfather gave me a day or two before he died. It contains enough of a tasteless, powerful narcotic to send twenty people to sleep so that nothing will wake them for several houra. I

will give you half of this to-night and keep half myself, and one of us must find an opportunity to get the crew to take it in their wine, or whatever they may drink, for they are sure to have one or two meals while we are on board.

"To-night I will send instructions in cypher to the Lossenskis in Vorobièvŏ to tell them that as many as possible of the Friends must be ready for action by eight to-morrow night, and must wait, if necessary, night after night till we come. If all goes well we shall select the new crew of the *Ithuriel* from them before we see two more sunrises. In fact, by the time we return from our voyage we must have absolute control of the vessel.

"Such an opportunity as this will never offer itself again, and I, for my part, am determined to risk anything, not excepting life itself, to take the best advantage of it. It would be madness to allow any scruples to stand in our way when the Empire of the Air is almost within our grasp."

"And none shall, so far as I am concerned," replied Serge in a low, steady voice that showed that his horror at the deed they contemplated had succumbed, at least for the moment, to the tremendous temptation offered by the prospect of success.

"Spoken like a true Romanoff!" said Olga, looking up at him with a sweet smile of approval. "As the deed is so shall the reward be. Now we must get back to our friends. We will find a means to get an hour together before to-night to arrange matters further, and we will have Alan and Alexis to supper with us after the opera, and then I will begin my share of the work. Once the air-ship is ours, we can hide her in one of the ravines of the Caucasus, hold a council of war in the villa at Vorobièvŏ, and set about the work of the Revolution in regular fashion."

The rest of the day was spent in accordance with the plans already agreed on. Olga and Serge had tea together in their private room before going to the theatre, and put the finishing touches to their plans for the momentous venture of the following day; and Alan and Alexis, all unsuspecting, accepted

their invitation to supper after their return from the opera-house.

The seemingly innocent and pleasant little supper, which passed off so merrily in the private sitting-room occupied by Olga and Serge, had but one incident which calls for description here, and even that was unnoticed not only by the two guests, but by Serge himself.

Just before midnight, Olga proposed that, in accordance with the ancient custom of Russia, they should drink a glass of punch, brewed in the Russian style; and as she volunteered to brew it herself, it is needless to say that the invitation was at once accepted.

The apparatus stood upon a little table in one corner of the room. For a single minute her back was turned to the three sitting at the table in the centre; her share in the conversation was not interrupted for an instant, and no one saw a couple of drops of sparkling, blue liquid fall into each of three of the glasses from the little flask that she held concealed in the palm of her hand, and when she turned round with the little silver tray on which the glasses stood, the flask was resting at the bottom of her dress-pocket.

She handed a glass to each of them, and then took her own up from the side-table where she had left it. She went to her place, and, holding her glass up, said simply—

"Here's to that which each of us has nearest at heart!" and drank.

All followed suit, and as the clock chimed twelve a few minutes later, the two Aerians took their leave, and left Olga and Serge alone.

"You said you would begin your share of the work to-night," said he, as soon as they were alone. "Have you done so?"

"If you do your work to-morrow as successfully as I have done mine to-night," replied Olga, looking steadily into his eyes as she spoke, "the Empire of the Air will no longer be theirs."

Serge returned her glance in silence. He wanted to speak, but some superior power seemed to have laid a spell upon his will, and as long as Olga's burning eyes were fixed on his, his

tongue was paralysed, nay, more than this, his mind even refused to shape the sentences that he would have liked to speak. Olga held him mute before her for several minutes, and then she said quietly, still keeping her eyes fixed on his—

"Now speak, and tell me what you would do if I told you that I preferred Alan as a lover to you, and that I would rather a thousand times be his slave and plaything than your wife."

"I should say that you are the mistress of my destiny, that I have no law but your will, and that it is for you to give me joy or pain, as seems good to you."

Serge spoke the unnatural words in a calm, passionless tone, rather as though he were speaking in a sort of hypnotic trance than in full command of his senses. A strange, subtle influence had been stealing through his veins and over his nerves ever since he had drunk the liquor which Olga had prepared.

He seemed perfectly incapable of resisting any suggestion that might have been made to him. His will was paralysed, but even the consciousness of this fact was fading from his mind. All his passions were absolutely in abeyance. Even his love for Olga failed to inspire him with any jealous resentment of words which half an hour before would have goaded him to frenzy. He heard them as though they concerned someone else.

The ruin of his life's hopes, which they implied so distinctly, had no meaning for him; so far as his volition was concerned he was an automaton, ready to obey without question the dictates of her imperious will.

"That will do," said Olga, in the tone of a mistress addressing a servant. "Now go to bed and sleep well, and remember the work that lies before you to-morrow."

"I will," said Serge, and without another word, without attempting to take his customary good-night kiss, he walked out of the room, leaving her to the enjoyment of her victory and the contemplation of triumphs that now seemed almost certain to her.

Punctual to its appointed time, the air-ship appeared in mid-air over the city a few minutes before ten the next

morning. It sank slowly and gracefully to within a hundred feet of the ground over the garden of the hotel in which the two Aerians and their new friends were staying.

Signals were rapidly exchanged as before between Alan and one of the crew standing on the afterpart of the deck. Then it sank down on to one of the snow-covered lawns of the garden, a door opened in the glass covering of the deck, a short, light, folding ladder with hand-rails dropped out of it to the ground, and Alan, springing up three or four of the steps, held out his hand to Olga, saying—

"Come along! we shall have a crowd round us in another minute."

This was true, for the appearance of the air-ship had already attracted hundreds of people in the streets, and many of them had already made their way into the gardens of the hotel in order to get a closer view of her.

Olga, feeling not a little like a queen ascending a throne, ran lightly up the steps, followed by Serge and Alexis. The moment they got on to the deck the ladder was drawn up, the glass door slid noiselessly to, and Alan at once presented them to his friends on deck.

While the introductions were taking place, the wings of the air-ship began to vibrate and undulate with a wavy motion from forward aft, at first slowly, and then more and more swiftly, her propeller whirled round, and the wonderful craft rose without a jar or a tremor from the earth. Then the propellers began to revolve faster and faster, and she shot forward and upward over the trees amid the admiring murmurs of the crowds in the streets about the hotel. But little did those light-hearted sightseers dream, any more than did the captain and crew of the *Ithuriel*, that this aerial pleasure-cruise was destined to mark the beginning of a tragedy that would involve the whole of civilised humanity in a catastrophe so colossal that the like of it had never been seen or even dreamt of on earth before. From the wit of a woman and the weakness of a man were now to be evolved the elements of destruction that ere long should lay the world in ruins.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW TERROR.

IVE years had passed since the *Ithuriel* had vanished like a cloud from the sky, leaving, so far as the air-ship itself was concerned, no more trace than if she had soared into space beyond the sphere of the earth's attraction and departed to another planet.

All the rest of the winter of 2030–1, tidings had been sought most anxiously, but in vain, by the kindred and friends of those who had formed her crew during the ill-fated voyage on which she had disappeared into the unknown. The earth had been ransacked east and west, north and south, by the aerial fleet in search of the missing *Ithuriel*, but without result.

She had been traced to St. Petersburg and Vorobièvŏ, but there, like the phantom craft of the Flying Dutchman, she had melted into thin air so far as any result of the search could show. But when the snows thawed on the mountains of Norway, and the bodies of eight Aerians who had formed her crew on her last fatal voyage were discovered by a couple of foresters in a melting snowdrift on the very spot on which Vladimir Romanoff had been killed with his companions by order of the Supreme Council, a thrill both of horror and excitement ran through the whole civilised world.

That their death was intimately connected with the disappearance of the air-ship was instantly plain to everyone, and the only inference which could be drawn from such a

conclusion was that at last some power, silent, mysterious, and intangible, had come into existence prepared to dispute the empire of the world with the Aerians, and, more than this, had already struck them a deadly blow which it was utterly beyond their power to return.

The effects of this discovery were exactly what Olga had anticipated. From the first time since their ancestors had conquered the earth and made war impossible, the supreme authority of the Aerians was called into question. It was quite beyond their power to conceal the fact that their flag-ship had either deserted or been captured, incredible as either alternative seemed. The Central Council therefore wisely accepted the situation, and immediately after the discovery of the bodies the President published a full account of her last voyage, as far as was known, in the columns of *The European Review*, the leading newspaper of the day in the Old World.

The only clue to the fate of the air-ship seemed to lie in the fact that at St. Petersburg a youth and young girl with whom Alan and Alexis had made friends on their journey from London had gone on board the *Ithuriel* for a trip to the clouds. But this led to nothing. Who was to recognise the daughter of the Tsar and the last male scion of the House of Romanoff in Olga and Serge Ivanitch, who had never been known as anything but the orphan grandchildren of Paul Ivanitch, the sculptor.

More than this, even to entertain for a moment the supposition that this boy and girl—for they were known to be little more—could by any possible means have overcome the ten Aerians, armed as they were with their terrible death-power, and then have vanished into space with the air-ship would have been to shatter the supremacy of the Aerians at a blow.

Even as it was, the wildest and most dangerous rumours began to fly from lip to lip and nation to nation all round the world, and for the first time since the days of the Terror the "Earth Folk" began to think of the Aerians rather as men

like themselves than as the superior race which they had hitherto regarded them.

The President of Aeria at once issued a proclamation asking, in the interests of peace and public security, for the assistance of all the civilised peoples of the earth in his efforts to discover the lost air-ship, and also conditionally declaring a war of extermination on any Power or nation which either concealed the whereabouts of the *Ithuriel* or gave any assistance to those who might be in possession of her. This proclamation was published simultaneously in all the newspapers of the world, and produced a most profound sensation wherever it was read.

The terrible magic of the ominous word "war" roused at once the deathless spirit of combativeness that had lain dormant for all these years. It was impossible not to recognise the fact that this mysterious power, which had come unseen into existence and had snatched the finest vessel in the Aerian navy from the possession of the Council with such daring and skill that not a trace of her was to be found, could have but one object in view, and that was to dispute the Empire of the Air with the descendants of the Terrorists.

This could mean nothing else than the outbreak, sooner or later, of a strife that would be a veritable battle of the gods, a struggle which would shake the world and convulse human society throughout its whole extent. The general sense of peace and security in which men had lived for four generations was shattered at a stroke by the universal apprehension of the blow that all men felt to be inevitable, but which would be struck no man knew when or how.

A year passed, and nothing happened. The world went on its way in peace, the Aerian patrols circled the earth with a moving girdle of aerial cruisers, ready to give instantaneous warning of the first reappearance of the lost *Ithuriel*; but nothing was discovered. If she still existed, she was so skilfully concealed as to be practically beyond the reach of human search.

Then without the slightest warning, while Anglo-Saxondom

was in the midst of the hundred and thirtieth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, the civilised world was started out of the sense of security into which it had once more begun to fall by the publication, in *The European Review*, of the following piece of intelligence:—

A MYSTERY OF THE SEA.

DISAPPEARANCE OF THREE TRANSPORTS.

It is our duty to chronicle the astounding and disquieting fact that the three transports, *Massilia*, *Ceres*, and *Astræa*, belonging respectively to the Eastern, Southern, and Western Services, have disappeared.

The first left New York for Southampton four days ago, and should have arrived yesterday. The Central Atlantic signalling station reported her "All well" at midday on Tuesday, and this is the last news that has been heard of her. The second was reported from Cape Verd Station on her voyage from Cape Town to Marseilles, and there all trace of her is lost, as she never reached the Canary Station. The third was last heard of from Station No. 2 in the Indian Ocean, which is situated at the intersection of the 80th meridian of east longitude with the 20th parallel of south latitude; she was on her way from Melbourne to Alexandria, and should have touched at Aden two days ago.

The disappearance of these three magnificent vessels, filled as they were with passengers and loaded with cargoes of enormous value both in money and material, can only be described as a calamity of world-wide importance. Unhappily, too, the mystery which surrounds their fate invests it with a sinister aspect which it is impossible to ignore.

That their loss is the result of accident or shipwreck it is almost impossible to believe. They represented the latest triumphs of modern shipbuilding. All were over forty thousand tons in measurement, and had engines capable of driving them at a speed of fifty nautical miles an hour through the water.

For fifty years no ocean transport has suffered shipwreck or even serious injury, so completely has modern engineering skill triumphed over the now conquered elements. Added to this, no storms of even ordinary violence have occurred along their routes. After passing the stations at which they were last reported, they vanished, and that is all that is known about them.

The President of Aeria has desired us to state that he has ordered his submarine squadrons stationed at Zanzibar, Ascension, and Fayal, to explore the ocean beds along the routes pursued by the transports. Until we receive news of the result of their investigation it will be well to refrain from further comment on this mysterious misfortune which has suddenly and unexpectedly fallen upon the world, and in doing so we shall only express the fervent desire of all civilised men and women when we express the hope that this calamity, grievous as it is, may not be the precursor of even greater misfortunes to come.

It would be almost impossible for us of the present day to form any adequate estimate of the thrill of horror and consternation which this brief and temperately-worded narration

of the mysterious loss of the three transports sent through the world of the twenty-first century. Not only was it the first event of the kind that had occurred within the memory of living men, but, saving the loss of the *Ithuriel*, it was the first dark cloud that had appeared in the clear heaven of peace and prosperity for more than a hundred and twenty years.

But terrible as was the state of excitement and anxiety into which it threw the nations of the world, it gave place to a still deeper horror and bewilderment when day after day passed and no tidings were received of the three submarine squadrons, consisting of three vessels each, which had been sent to inquire into the fate of the transports. They dived beneath the waves of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, and that was the last that was ever seen of them.

Month after month went by, every week bringing news of some fresh calamity at sea—of the disappearance of transport after transport along the great routes of ocean travel, of squadron after squadron of submarine cruisers which plunged into the abysses of the sea to discover and attack the mysterious enemy of mankind that lay hidden in the depths, and which never reappeared on the surface. Whether they were captured or destroyed it was impossible to say, simply because no member of their crews ever returned to tell the tale.

Whatever doubt there had been as to the existence or hostile nature of this ocean terror that was paralysing the trade of the world was speedily set at rest by a discovery made in the spring of the year 2032 by a party of divers who descended to repair a fault in one of the Atlantic cables about two hundred miles west of Ireland.

There, lying in the Atlantic ooze, they found the shattered fragments of the *Sirius*, a transport which had disappeared about a month before. The great hull of the splendid vessel had been torn asunder by some explosive of tremendous power, and, more than this, her hold had been rifled of all its treasure and the most valuable portions of its cargo. After this there no longer remained any doubt that the depths of

the ocean were the hunting-ground of some foe of society, one at least of whose objects was plunder.

The President and Council of Aeria found themselves at last confronted and baffled by an enemy who could neither be seen nor reached in his hiding-place, wherever it might be, beneath the surface of the waters. Thousands of lives had been sacrificed, and treasure in millions had been lost by the end of the first year of what men had now come to call the New Terror.

New fleets of submarine cruisers were built and held in readiness in all the great ports of the world, and these scoured the ocean depths in all directions with no further result than the swift and silent annihilation of vessel after vessel by some power which struck irresistibly out of the darkness and then vanished the moment that the blow had been delivered.

As yet, however, no enemy appeared on land or in the air, nor were any tidings heard of the lost *Ithuriel*, or her captain and lieutenant. The Aerians had replaced her with ten almost identical vessels and had raised the strength of their navy to two hundred and fifty vessels, one hundred of which were kept in readiness in Aeria, while the other hundred and fifty were distributed in small squadrons at twenty-four stations, half of which were in the Western hemisphere and half in the Eastern.

The submarine warfare had now practically ceased. Nearly two hundred vessels belonging to Aeria, Britain, and America, had been captured or destroyed by an enemy which at the period at which this portion of the narrative opens was as supreme throughout the realm of the waters as the Aerians were in the air. To the menace of the air-ships this hidden foe replied by severing all the oceanic cables and paralysing the communication of the world save overland and through the air.

Thus, at the end of six years after the capture of the *Ithuriel* by Olga Romanoff more than half the work of those who had brought peace on earth after the Armageddon of 1904 had been undone. All over the world, not even excepting in Aeria, men lived in a state of constant anxiety and apprehen-

sion, not knowing where or how their invisible enemy would strike them next.

The Masters of the World were supreme no longer, for a new power had arisen which, within the limits of the seas, had proved itself stronger than they were. Communication between continent and continent had almost ceased, save where the Aerian air-ships were employed. In six short years the peace of the world had been destroyed and the stability of society shaken.

Among the nations of Anglo-Saxondom the change had manifested itself by a swift decadence into the worst forms of unbridled democracy. Men's minds were unhinged, and the most extravagant opinions found acceptance.

Parliaments had already been made annual and were fast sinking into machines for registering the ever-changing opinions of rival factions and their leaders. Sovereigns and presidents were little better than popular puppets existing on sufferance. In short, all that Paul Romanoff had prophesied was coming to pass more rapidly than even he had expected so far as the area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation was concerned.

In the Moslem Empire affairs were different, but no less threatening. The Sultan Khalid the Magnificent, as he was justly styled by his admirers, saw clearly that the time must come when this mysterious enemy would emerge from the waters and attempt the conquest of the land, and for three years past he had been manufacturing weapons and forming armies against the day of battle which he considered inevitable, and which he longed for rather than dreaded.

Thus, while Anglo-Saxondom was lapsing into the anarchy of unrestrained democracy, the Moslem monarch was preparing to take advantage of the issue of events which, skilfully turned to account, might one day make him master of the world.

Such was the condition of affairs throughout the world on the 1st of May 2036, and then the long-expected came in strange and terrible shape. At midnight a blaze of light was seen far up in the sky over the city of Aeria. A moment later

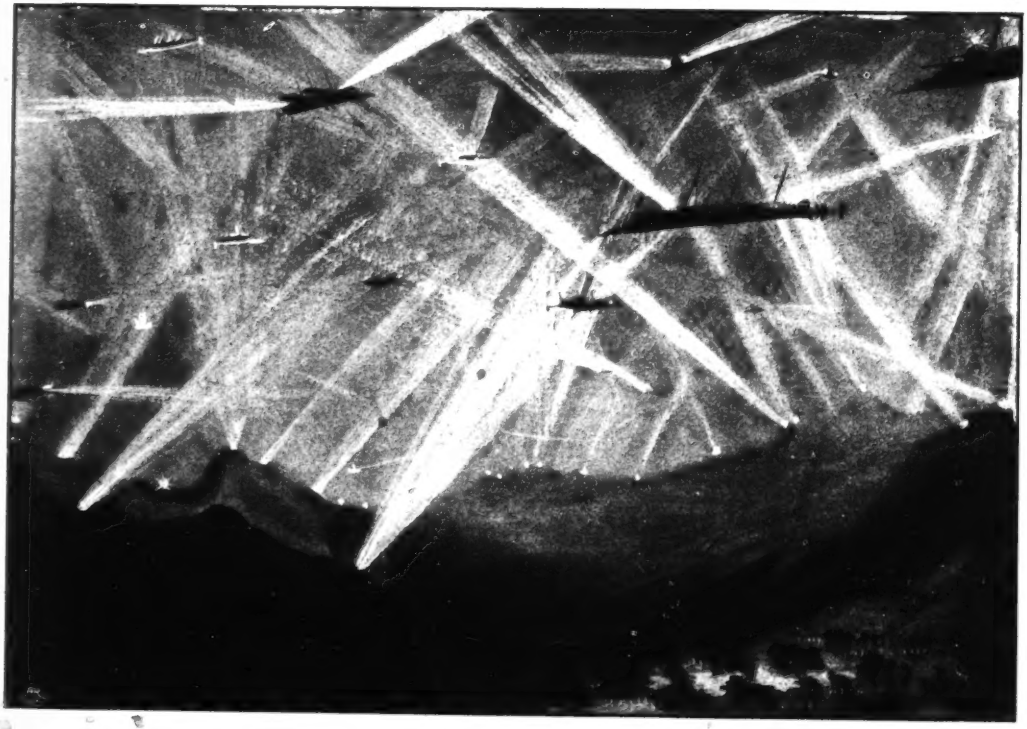
something that must have been a small block of metal fell from a tremendous height in the square in the centre of the city, and was shivered to fragments by the force of its fall.

On the splintered pavement where it fell was found a little roll of parchment addressed to the President. It was taken to him, and he opened it and read these words :—

To Alan Arnold, President of Aeria.

If you want your son Alan and his friend Alexis, go and look for them on an island which you will find near the intersection of the 40th parallel of south latitude and the 120th meridian of west longitude in the South Pacific. They have served my turn, and I have done with them. Perhaps they will be able to tell you how I have conquered the Empire of the Sea. Before long I shall have wrested the Empire of the Air from you as well.

OLGA ROMANOFF.



FLINGING LONG STREAMS OF RADIANCE FOR MILES INTO THE SKY.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE FLIGHT OF THE "REVENGE."

ASTOUNDING, almost stupefying, as were the tidings conveyed by this letter, which had dropped like a veritable bolt from the blue, the challenge contained in the last sentence and the ominous name with which it was signed were matters of infinitely greater and more instant importance.

Alan Arnold was the responsible President of Aeria first and a father afterwards. He lost not a moment in speculating upon the strange fate of his son and first-born. The safety not only of Aeria, but of the world, demanded his first attention, and he gave it.

Crushing the missive in his hand he took two swift strides to a telephone in the wall of the room in which he had received the message from the skies and delivered several rapid orders through it. If they had been the words of a demi-god instead of those of a man their effects could scarcely have been more instantaneous or marvellous.

On a hundred mountain-peaks all round the great valley of Aeria enormous lights blazed out simultaneously, flinging long streams of radiance, dazzling and intense, for miles into the sky towards all points of the compass, and at the same moment fifty air-ships soared up from their stations all round the mountains, flashing their search-lights ahead and astern in all directions.

It was a scene of unearthly wonder and magnificence, a scene such as could only have been made possible by the triumphant genius of a race of men, heirs of all the best that earth could give them, who had turned the favour of circumstance to the utmost advantage.

Three minutes sufficed for the aerial cruisers to clear the mountains, and as they did so the wide-sweeping rays of fifty search-lights, assisted by the blazing orbs which crowned every mountain-peak, illuminated the darkness for many miles outside the valley. In the midst of the sea of light thus projected through the semi-darkness of the starlit heavens the flying shape of an air-ship was detected speeding away to the south-eastward.

Instantly the prows of the whole squadron were turned towards her, and the first aerial race in the history of the world began. The pursuing air-ships spread themselves out in a huge semicircle, at the extremities of which were the two swiftest vessels in the fleet, almost exact counterparts of the lost *Ithuriel*. One of these bore the same name as the stolen flag-ship, and the other had been named the *Ariel*, after the first vessel built by Richard Arnold, the conqueror of the air, a hundred and thirty-two years before.

These two vessels carried ten guns each, and were capable of a maximum speed of five hundred miles an hour, the highest velocity that it had so far been found possible to attain. The others were somewhat smaller craft, mounting eight guns each, and capable of a speed of about four hundred miles an hour. The chase, either because she could not travel faster or for some hidden reason, allowed the pursuing squadron to gain upon her until she was only some five miles ahead of its two foremost vessels, which were travelling at the highest speed attainable by the whole flotilla.

She showed no lights, and so in order to keep her in view it was necessary for her pursuers to keep their search-lights constantly sweeping the skies ahead of them, lest they should lose sight of her in the semi-darkness.

This placed the Aerian fleet at a serious disadvantage, which

very soon became apparent, for before the pursuit had lasted an hour the chase opened fire with her stern guns and shell after shell charged with some terrific explosive began bursting along the line of the pursuing squadron, producing fearful concussions in the atmosphere, and causing the pursuers to rock and toss in the shaken air like ships on a stormy sea.

The *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*, at the two extremities of the semicircle, replied with a rapid converging fire from their bow guns in the hope of reaching the now invisible chase. All the projectiles were, of course, time-shells, but the speed at which the vessels were travelling not only made the aim hopeless, but caused such an in-rush of air into the muzzles of the guns that the projectiles, checked in their course through the barrels, flew wild and exploded at random, often in dangerous proximity to the vessels themselves.

Hence, after about a dozen shots had been fired, the commanders of the two vessels found themselves compelled to cease firing, and to trust to speed alone to overtake the enemy. On the other hand, this disadvantage to them was all in favour of the chase, which was able to work her two stern guns without the slightest impediment. Before long she got the range of her pursuers, and at last a shell burst fairly under one of the smaller vessels. A brilliant flash of light, blue as the lightning-bolt, illuminated her for an instant, and in that instant her companions saw her stop and shiver like a stricken bird in mid-air, and then plunge downwards like a stone to the earth.

Olga Romanoff, standing on the deck of what had once been the *Ithuriel*, flag-ship of the Aerian fleet, and now renamed the *Revenge*, saw this catastrophe, as the others had done, through her night-glasses. She lowered them from her eyes, and said to a dark-eyed, black-haired young fellow, who was commanding the gun that had done the execution—

"Bravo, Boris Lossenski! Did you sight that gun?"

Boris drew himself up and saluted, saying—

"Yes, Majesty, I did."

"Then for that you shall be a Prince henceforth, and if you

can bring another down you shall command an air-ship of your own when this fight is over."

Boris saluted again, and ordered the gun to be reloaded. Before it could be discharged a shell from the port gun, which had been fired as Olga spoke, struck another of the Aerian vessels square on the fore-quarter. The flash of the exploding projectile was almost instantaneously followed by the outburst of a vast dazzling mass of flame which illumined for the instant the whole scene of the aerial battle.

The air-ship with all its cargo of explosives blew up like one huge shell, and the frightful concussion of the atmosphere induced by the explosion hurled the two vessels that were close on either side of her like feathers into space, turning them completely over and flinging them to the earth six thousand feet below. A few moments later they struck the ground simultaneously, two great spouts of flame shot up from the spots where they struck, and when the darkness closed over them again four of the pursuing squadron had been annihilated.

"Better still, Levin Ostroff!" cried Olga, as she saw the awful effects of this last shot. "For that you too shall be a Prince of the Empire and command an air-ship on our next expedition. Now, Boris, let us see if you can beat that!"

"Yes, Majesty," said Boris again, knitting his brows and clenching his teeth in anger at his rival's superior success. He glanced along the line of the pursuers and saw four of the Aerian squadron flying close together. He brought the gun to bear upon the two inner ones, took careful aim, and despatched the projectile on its errand of destruction. The moment he had released it he said to the two men who were working under him—

"Load again, quickly!"

The command was instantly obeyed, and scarcely had the explosion of the first blazed out than a second shell was sent after it. The very firmament seemed split in twain by the frightful results of the two well-aimed shots, each of which

had found its mark on the two inner vessels with fatal accuracy.

Great sheets of flame leapt out in all directions from the focus of the explosion, and in the midst of their dazzling radiance those on board the *Revenge* saw the two outside airships of the four roll over and dive head foremost into the dark abyss below them. They struck the earth as the others had done, and vanished into annihilation in the midst of the momentary mist of fire.

This last catastrophe made it plain to the commanders of the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* that to continue the chase under such conditions meant the destruction in detail of all the smaller ships of the squadron. Those on board the *Revenge* saw signals rapidly flash from one end of the line, and instantaneously answered from the other end.

"Ah!" said Olga. "My Lords of the Air seem to have had enough of it for the present. Look, the small fry are falling to the rear; our reception has been a little too hot for them. I wonder what they are going to do now. Cease firing, and let us watch them. You two gunners have done gloriously and earned quite enough laurels for your first battle."

It soon became evident that the Aerians had decided to send their smaller craft back. From the speed of the *Revenge*, and the terrible accuracy and destructiveness of her guns, the commanders of the squadron were now convinced that she was either the lost *Ithuriel*, or some vessel even superior to her, built upon the same plan.

This being so, to have continued the pursuit under such conditions with the smaller craft would simply have been to court destruction for them in detail. It was impossible for them to use their guns effectively at the speed at which they were travelling, while, as had been so terribly proved, the chase could use hers with perfect ease.

The flying fight could thus only result under present conditions in the ignominious defeat of the squadron by the single vessel as long as she was able to keep ahead. The only hope of success lay, therefore, in a trial of speed and

manœuvring skill between her and the *Ithuriel* and *Ariel*, so orders were flashed to the smaller vessels to return to Aeria with the mournful tidings of the destruction of eight of their number.

As they vanished into the darkness behind, Olga divined instantly the tactics that were to be adopted. She saw the converging search-lights of the two remaining air-ships begin to glow brighter and brighter in the rear of the *Revenge*, proving that they had increased their speed.

"So, it is going to be a race, is it!" she said, half to herself. "Well, we will see if we can lead them into the trap. How fast are we going, Boris?"

He went to the engine-room, and returned saying—

"Four hundred miles an hour, Majesty."

"Make it five," replied Olga.

He saluted, and transmitted the order to the engineer. The lights of the pursuers immediately began to recede again, then they seemed to stop.

"That will do!" said Olga. "They have reached the limit of their speed. Keep to the southward, and see that they come no nearer."

The three air-ships were, in fact, now travelling at their utmost speed. If anything, the advantage was slightly in favour of the *Revenge*, thanks to the high efficiency of the motive-power which had been applied to her in accordance with the directions left by Olga's father, and transmitted in the will of Paul Romanoff.

So all the rest of the night and on into the next day pursuers and pursued sped on with fearful velocity through the air. They passed over Africa and out above the ocean, and still on and on they swept until the Southern Sea was crossed and the mighty ice-barrier that fences in the South Pole gleamed out white upon the horizon.

This was passed, and still they rushed on over the dreary wastes of Antarctica. The pole was crossed along the 40th meridian, and then they swept northward until the smoke-cloud that crowned the crest of Mount Erebus rose above the snow-

clouds that hid the earth. The *Revenge* headed straight towards this and swept over it, followed at a distance of about ten miles by her pursuers.

Then with a mighty upward sweep she leapt two thousand feet higher still, came to equilibrium, and discharged a shell downwards on to the ice. The explosion was answered by the rising of a flotilla of air-ships, which seemed to have sprung out of the bowels of the earth.

Thirty vessels as large as herself rose simultaneously through the clouds and spread themselves out in a wide circle round the two Aerian vessels, which thus found themselves surrounded by an overwhelming force and dominated by the *Revenge* floating far above them with her ten guns pointed down upon them.

To an observer so placed as to be able to command a view of the situation it would have seemed that nothing short of the surrender or annihilation of the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* could have been the outcome of it.

So evidently thought Olga and those in command of the Russian aerial fleet, for, although for one brief instant the two Aerian vessels lay at their mercy, they failed to take advantage of it, and in losing this one precious moment they reckoned without the superior skill and perfect control of their air-ships possessed by those of whom they thought to make an easy prey.

What really happened took place with such stupefying suddenness that they were taken completely off their guard. The *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* lay end on to each other in the midst of the circle of their enemies. Each mounted ten guns, and of these every one was available. The crews of both vessels, trained by constant practice to the highest point of efficiency, knew exactly what to do without so much as an order being given.

Automatically the twenty guns were trained in the twinkling of an eye, each on a Russian vessel, and discharged simultaneously. A moment later the two vessels sank like stones through the thick clouds below them; and while the heavens

above were shaken with the combined explosions of the twenty projectiles, each of which had found its mark with unerring accuracy, they had regained their equilibrium a thousand feet from the surface of the ice, and darted away full speed northward.

To such a fearful pitch of efficiency had their guns and projectiles been brought that, while the aim was unerring if once a fair sight was obtained, nothing shaped by human hands could withstand the impact of their shells without destruction. Twenty out of the thirty vessels of the Russian fleet collapsed, and, as it were, shrivelled up under the frightful energy of the Aerian projectiles. Twenty masses of flame blazed out over the grey surface of the cloud-sea, and in another moment the fragments of the vessels it had taken so many months of labour and such wondrous skill to construct were lying scattered far and wide over the snow and ice of the Antarctic desert.

The awful suddenness with which this destruction had been accomplished deprived Olga and her subordinates of all power of thought for the moment. They heard the roar of the explosions, and saw a mist of flame burst out round them as though all the fires of Mount Erebus had broken loose at once, and then came the silence of speechless horror and stupefaction. It was more like the work of omnipotent fiends than of men. The bolts of heaven themselves could have done nothing like it.

Then the moment of the shock passed, and those who survived remembered what they ought never to have forgotten —that, armed as they were with weapons which under favourable circumstances were absolutely irresistible, the first shot meant victory for those who fired it, and destruction for their enemies. Odds of mere numbers went for nothing, for each air-ship was equal to ten others provided she could send her ten projectiles home first, and this is just what had happened.

All this had passed in a twentieth of the time that it has taken to describe it, and by the time Olga and her subordinates grasped the extent of the calamity that had overtaken

them the two Aerian vessels, darting through the air at five hundred miles an hour, had swept far out of range of their guns, and were moreover so hidden by the cloud-sea, that they had no idea which course they had taken.

Olga stamped her foot upon the deck, and, in a paroxysm of unrestrained passion, literally screamed with rage as she ordered the *Revenge* to sink below the clouds. Less than two minutes sufficed for the remains of the fleet, that had been thirty-one strong five minutes before and now only numbered eleven vessels, to sink through the clouds.

A rapid glance round showed them the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*, tiny specks far out over the waste of snow and ice, speeding away to the northward. To give chase was out of the question, for scarcely had they sighted them than they vanished as completely as though they had melted into the atmosphere; and so Olga signalled for her remaining vessels to proceed to their secret haven in the snowy solitudes of the South, while the *Ithuriel* and her consort sped onward on their homeward voyage, to carry the news of the terrible vengeance that they had taken for the destruction of the eight air-ships which had been annihilated by the guns of the *Revenge*.

Twenty hours sufficed for the two Aerian vessels to pass over a quarter of the earth's circumference, and carry their tidings of vengeance and victory to Aeria, and shortly after noon on the day but one after Olga had dropped her challenge from the skies, a meeting of the Ruling Council was held at the President's house in order to consider the startling and pregnant events which had taken place, and to determine the plan of the war which, after a hundred and thirty years of unquestioned supremacy, they were now called upon to wage not only for the mastery of the world, but for the very lives and liberties of the citizens of Aeria.

It had of course been impossible to conceal from the inhabitants of the valley the gravity of the startling events which had taken place in such rapid succession, nor did the President and Council consider any such concealment desirable. There were no demagogues and no politics in Aeria, and

therefore there was no need for any State secrets save those which contained the essentials of aerial navigation.

There was also no fear of panic in a community which contained no ignorant or criminal classes, and so, while the Council was sitting, the strange tidings were promulgated throughout the length and breadth of the valley. Marvellous and disquieting as they were they yet gave rise to very few external signs of excitement. They were gravely, earnestly, and even anxiously discussed, for they brought with them a prophecy of calamities to come, the probability of whose realisation was too plain to be ignored.

But ever since the days of the Terror each generation of Aerians had been carefully trained to recognise the fact that the progress of science and the restlessness of human invention in the world outside their borders must, sooner or later, produce some challenge to their supremacy and some attempt to dispute with them the Empire of the Air. Now, after four generations—in spite of all the elaborate precautions that had been taken, the stringent laws that had been enacted and more than once mercilessly enforced—the crisis had come.

It was now impossible to doubt that by some means, which so far seemed almost superhuman, the flag-ship of their fleet had been stolen, and the son of the President kidnapped with his greatest friend. More than this, the news brought back by the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* proved beyond all doubt that means had been found to build a large fleet of aerial warships without even arousing the suspicions of the Council. And, worst and most sinister sign of all, there was also the fact, proved by Olga's letter to the President, that the moving spirit in this defiant revolt against the supremacy of Aeria was one who bore the ill-omened and still hated name of Romanoff.

As has been said, there was no panic that night in Aeria, but still many a man and woman anxiously asked, either aloud or in his or her own soul, whether in the mysterious revolution of human affairs it might not be about to come to pass that she who had wrought this apparent miracle might not yet be able to avenge the terrible fate of her ancestor, the Last of

the Tsars. Then, with this thought came a universal revulsion of horror at the prospect of such a crime against humanity and a deep resolve to exact the penalty for it to the uttermost.

If war was to be brought once more upon the earth, those who brought it would find Aeria worthy of its splendid traditions and ready, if necessary, to reconquer the earth as the founders of its empire had done in the Armageddon of 1904. Fierce as that mighty struggle had been, its horrors would pale before those of a conflict in which conquest would mean extermination, for if Aeria was forced once more to draw the sword it would not be sheathed until there was peace again on earth, even if that peace were to be but the silence of universal desolation.

CHAPTER X.

STRANGE TIDINGS TO AERIA.

HE sitting of the Council lasted until nightfall, and just as the western mountains were throwing their huge shadows over the lovely valley, two more air-ships passed between two of the southward peaks and alighted in the great square in the centre of the city. They were the two vessels which had been sent to the island indicated in Olga's letter to bring back the long-lost Alan and Alexis.

It would be vain to attempt to describe the feelings with which the President and the father of Alexis went, as they thought, to receive their sons, but the air-ships had returned without them, and in their stead they brought a written message which conveyed tidings no less strange and startling than those brought from Antarctica by the *Ithuriel* and her consort.

It was a letter from Alan to his father, and as soon as he received it from the captain of one of the air-ships, who had found it nailed to a tree on the island, he took his friend into his library, and there the two fathers read it together.

After briefly but circumstantially recounting the capture of the flag-ship by Olga by means of her subtle drugs, and showing how, by using the power they gave her, she had kept them in mental slavery for years, forcing them to employ their skill and knowledge in aiding her to build her aerial and submarine fleets out of the spoils of the destroyed ocean transports, from which

the latter had taken an incalculable amount of treasure, Alan's letter concluded thus:—

I will now tell you the reason why Alexis and myself have not waited for the air-ship which we knew you would send for us as soon as you received the message which Olga Romanoff told us she would despatch to you. We consider that by our weakness and folly—or, in truth, I should rather say mine, for it was I who invited these treacherous guests on board the *Ithuriel*—we have not only brought endless calamities upon the world, but we have also forfeited our right to the citizenship of Aeria.

What the judgment of the Council would be upon us I don't know, but we are resolved that, whatever it might have been, you and Alexis's father shall be spared the sorrow of pronouncing sentence upon your own sons. Some day perhaps we may win at least the right to plead our cause before you. At present we have none, and until we have won it you shall not see us again unless you capture us by force.

We were sent here in the *Narwhal*, the swiftest and most powerful vessel of the Russian submarine fleet. Only a few days ago an accident revealed to Alexis for the first time during our long mental slavery the means which this woman, who is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend, had used to keep us in subjection. We took the utmost care to give her no suspicion of his discovery, and although we drank no more of her poison we acted exactly as though we were still under its influence.

In what could only have been mockery she gave us back our belts and coronets, bidding us wear them "when we returned to our kingdom," as she put it. We shall never wear the winged circlets again till we have regained the right to do so, but the belts and a couple of brace of magazine pistols which we took before we left her stronghold in Antarctica stood us in good stead.

We have killed the crew of the *Narwhal*, and taken possession of her. She is far swifter and more powerful than any vessel in our submarine navy, for she can be driven at a hundred and fifty miles an hour through the water, and can destroy anything that floats in or on the sea with a blow of her ram, and, more than this, she carries a torpedo battery which has an effective range of two miles, and can strike and destroy anything within that distance without giving the slightest warning of her presence.

There are fifty vessels of this type in the Russian fleet, but the *Narwhal* is at least thirty miles an hour faster than any of them. An attack will probably be made by the Russians on our station at Kerguelen Island within a week by submarine vessels and a small squadron of air-ships, and there we shall begin our operations against the enemy. If you have any reply to make to this letter we will wait for it at sea off Kerguelen, and then begin the campaign we have planned. We shall never rest until we have either destroyed the Russian fleet in detail or have died in the attempt to do so.

If we ever return it will be to restore to you the supremacy of the sea, and then, and not till then, we will ask you to pardon our fault and will willingly submit to such further conditions as you may see fit to impose upon us before you give us back—if ever you do—the rights which we have lost.

With all love and duty to yourself, and loving remembrances to the dear ones in Aeria, your son ALAN.

At the foot of the letter was a postscript signed by Alexis, indorsing all that Alan had said, save with regard to his sole responsibility for the calamity that had ensued from the admission of Olga and Serge on board the *Ithuriel*.

The two fathers discussed the strange, and, to them, most affecting communication for nearly an hour in private, and then another meeting of the Council was called to consider it and pronounce authoritatively upon it. The President read the letter aloud in a voice which betrayed no trace of the deep emotion that moved his inmost being, and then left the Council chamber with Maurice Masarov, so that their presence might not embarrass their colleagues.

The simple, manly straightforwardness of Alan's letter appealed far more eloquently to the Council than excuses or prayers for forgiveness would have done. It was plain, too, that after the first indiscretion of taking the strangers on board the air-ship, no moral responsibility or blame could be laid on Alan and Alexis for what they had done under the influence of a drug which had paralysed their moral sense.

The Council, therefore, not only accepted the conditions of the letter, but without a dissentient voice, agreed to confer the first and second commands of the Aerian submarine fleets and stations for the time being upon Alan and Alexis, with permission to call in the aid of the nearest aerial squadron when necessary. This decision was despatched forthwith by an air-ship to Kerguelen, and within an hour all Aeria was talking of nothing else than the strange fate of the two youths who for five years had been mourned as dead.

Later on that evening, when the twin snow-clad peaks which towered high above the city of Aeria had lost the pink after-glow of the departed sunlight, and were beginning to gleam with a whiter radiance in the level beams of the newly-risen moon, a girl was standing on the spacious terrace of a marble villa which stood on the summit of a rounded eminence a couple of miles from the western verge of the city.

She had just crossed the threshold of womanhood. The next sun that would rise would be that of her twentieth birth-

day. Yet for two years she had worn the silver circle and crystal wings, for in Aeria a girl became of legal age at eighteen, though she took no share in the civil life of the community until she was married, an event which, as a rule, took place not long after she was invested with the symbol of citizenship.

It was an exceedingly rare event for an Aerian girl to reach the eve of her twentieth year unmarried, for the sexes in the Central-African paradise were very evenly balanced, and, as was natural in a very high state of civilisation, where families seldom exceeded three or four children, celibacy in either sex was looked upon as a public misfortune and a private reproach.

But Alma Tremayne, the girl who was standing on the terrace of her father's house on this most eventful evening, had become an exception to the rule through circumstances so sad and strange that her loneliness was an honour rather than a reproach. There were many of the wearers of the golden wings who had sought long and ardently to win her from the allegiance which forbade her to look with favouring eyes upon any of them.

She was beautiful in a land where all women were fair, a land where, under the most favourable conditions that could be conceived, a race of almost more than human strength and beauty had been evolved, and she came of a family scarcely second in honour even to that of the President, for she was the direct descendant in the fifth generation of Alan Tremayne, first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, through his son Cyril born two years after the daughter who had married the first-born son of Natasha and Richard Arnold.

More than five years before she and Alan had plighted their boy-and-girl troth on the eve of his departure on the fateful voyage from which he had never returned, and of which no tidings had reached Aeria until a few hours before. To the simple vow which her girlish lips had then spoken she had remained steadfast even when, as the years went by and still no tidings came of her lost lover, she, in common with her own kindred, had begun to mourn him as dead.

It is true that she was in love rather with a memory than

with a man, yet with some natures such a love as this is stronger than any other, more ideal and more lasting, and exempt from the danger of growing cold in fruition. So strong was the hold that this ideal love had taken upon her being that the idea of even accepting the love and homage of any other man appeared as sacrilegious to her as the embrace of an earthly lover would have seemed to a nun of the Middle Ages.

And so, with a single companion in her solitary state, she stood aside and watched with patient, unregretful eyes the wedded happiness of her more fortunate friends. This companion was Isma Arnold, Alan's sister, who had a double reason for doing as Alma had done.

Not only had she resolved never to marry while her brother's fate remained uncertain, but she, too, had also made her choice among the youths of Aeria, and in such matters an Aerian girl seldom chose twice. So she waited for Alexis as Alma did for Alan, hoping even against her convictions, and keeping his memory undefiled in the sacred shrine of her maiden soul.

No artist could have dreamed of a fairer picture than Alma standing there on the terrace overlooking the stately city and the dark shining lake at her feet. She was clad in soft, clinging garments of whitest linen and finest silk of shimmering, pearly grey, edged with a dainty embroidery of gold and silver thread.

Her dress, confined at the waist with a girdle of interlinked azurine and gold, clothed without concealing the beauties of her perfect form, and her hair, crowned by her crystal-winged coronet, flowed unrestrained, after the custom of the maidens of Aeria, over her shoulders in long and lustrous waves of dusky brown. There was a shadow in the great deep grey eyes which looked up as though in mute appeal to the starlight, the shadow of a sorrow which can never come to a woman more than once.

All these years she had loved in cheerful patience and perfect faith the man for whose memory she had lived in maiden widowhood—and now, who could measure the depth of the darkness, darker than the shadow of death itself, that had fallen across her life, severing the past from the present with a chasm that seemed impassable, and leaving the future but a barren,

loveless waste to be trodden by her in weariness and loneliness until the end!

All these years she had loved an ideal man, one of her own splendid race, the very chosen of the earth, as pure in his unblemished manhood as she was in the stainless maidenhood that she had held so sacred for his sake even while she thought him dead—and, lo! the years had passed, and he had come back to life, but how? Hers was not the false innocence of ignorance. She knew the evil and the good, and because she knew both shrank from contamination with the horror born of knowledge.

She had seen both Olga's letter and Alan's, and those two terrible sentences, "They have served my turn, and I have done with them," and "She is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend," kept ringing their fatal changes through her brain in pitiless succession, forcing all the revolting possibilities of their meaning into her tortured soul till her reason seemed to reel under their insupportable stress.

Mocking voices spoke to her out of the night, and told her of the unholy love that such a woman would, in the plenitude of her unnatural power, have for such a man; how she would subdue him, and make him not only her lover but her slave; how she would humble his splendid manhood, and play with him until her evil fancy was sated, and then cast him aside—as she had done—like a toy of which she had tired.

Better a thousand times that he had died as his murdered comrades had died—in the northern snowdrift into which this Syren of the Skies had cast them, to sleep the sleep that knew neither dreams nor waking! Better for him and her that he had gone before her into the shadows, and had remained her ideal love until, hand in hand, they could begin their lives anew upon a higher plane of existence.

As these thoughts passed and repassed through her mind with pitiless persistence, her lovely face grew rigid and white under the starlight, and, but for the nervous twining and untwining of her fingers as her hands clasped and unclasped behind her, her motionless form might have been carved out of stone. For the first time since peace had been proclaimed on

earth, a hundred and thirty-two years ago, the flames of war had burst forth again, and for the first time in the story of her race the snake had entered the now no longer enchanted Eden of Aeria.

It was hers to suffer the first real agony of soul that any woman of her people had passed through since Natasha, in the palm-grove down yonder by the lake, had told Richard Arnold of her love on the night that he had received the Master's command to take her to another man to be his wife.

There were no tears in the fixed, wide-open eyes that stared almost sightlessly up to the skies, in which the stars were now paling in the growing light of the moon. The torment of her torturing thoughts was too great for that.

She was growing blind and dizzy under the merciless stress of them, when—it might have been just in time to save her from the madness that seemed the only outcome of her misery—the sweet, silvery tones of a girl's voice floated through the still, scented air uttering her name—

"Alma!"

The sound mercifully recalled her wandering senses in an instant. It was the voice of her friend, of the sister of her now doubly-lost lover, and it reproved the selfishness of her great sorrow by reminding her that she was not suffering alone. As the sound of her name reached her ear the rigidity of her form relaxed, the light came back to her eyes, and turning her head she looked in the direction whence it came.

There was a soft whirring of wings in the still air of the tropic night, and out of the half-darkness floated a shape that looked like a realisation of one of the Old-World fairy-tales. It was a vessel some twenty-five feet long by five wide, built of white, polished metal, and shaped something like an old Norse galley, with its high, arching prow fashioned like the breast and neck of a swan.

From the sides projected a pair of wide, rapidly-undulating wings, and in the open space between these stood on the floor of the boat the figure of a girl whose loose, golden hair floated out behind her with the rapid motion of her fairy craft.

There was no need for words of greeting between the two girl friends. Alma knew the kindly errand on which Isma had come, and as she stepped out she went towards her with hands outstretched in silent welcome.

As their hands met, and the two girls stood face to face, motionless for a moment, they made an exquisite contrast of opposite types of womanly beauty—Alma tall and stately, with a proudly-carried head, clear, pale skin, grey eyes, and perfectly regular features, and Isma, a year younger and a good inch shorter, slender of form yet strong and lithe of limb, with golden, silky hair and sunny-blue eyes, fresh, rosy skin, and mobile features which scarcely ever seemed to wear the same expression for a couple of minutes together—as sweet a daughter of delight as ever man could look upon with eyes of love and longing.

But she was grave enough now, for her friend's sorrow was hers too, and its shadow lay with equal darkness upon her. The ready tears welled up under her dark lashes as she looked upon Alma's white, drawn face and dry, burning eyes, and her low, sweet voice was broken by a sob as, passing her arm round her waist, she drew her towards the boat and said—

"Come, dear, this sorrow belongs to me as well as you and we must help each other to bear it. I have brought my new boat so that we can take a flight round the valley and talk about it quietly. If two heads are better than one, so are two hearts."

Alma's only reply to the invitation was a sad, sweet smile, and a gentle caress, but the welcome, loving sympathy had come when it was most sorely needed, and so she got into the aerial boat with Isma, and a few moments later the beautiful craft was bearing them at an easy speed southward down the valley.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SNAKE IN EDEN.

NO more perfect place could have been imagined for an exchange of confidences and sympathy between two girls situated as Alma and Isma were than the oval, daintily-cushioned interior of the *Cygna*, as Isma had called her swan-prowed craft.

Skirting the mountains, at a distance of about five hundred yards from them, and at a height of about as many feet from the summits of the undulating foothills below, the *Cygna* sped quietly along at a speed of some twenty-five miles an hour. The temperature of the tropic night was so soft and warm, and the air was so dry that it was not even necessary for them to make use of the light wraps that lay in the stern of the boat.

Isma reclined in the after part of the broad, low seat which ran round the inside, with one hand resting lightly upon a little silver lever which could be used for working the rudder-fan, in addition to the tiller-ropes, which she held in her hands while standing up. Alma sat almost upright amidships, with one hand clasped on the rail of polished satin-wood which ran round the well of the boat, her head turned away from Isma and her eyes fixed upon two dim points of light far away to the southward, which marked the position of the two moonlit, snowy peaks which guarded the southern confines of the valley.

For several minutes they proceeded thus in silence, which neither seemed inclined to break. At length Isma looked up

at a planet that was shining redly over the northern mountains, and, possessed by a sudden inspiration, said—

"Look, Alma, there is Mars returning to our skies!"

"Yes," said Alma, turning round and gazing from beneath her slightly-frowning brows at the ruddy planet; "it is a fitting time for him to come back now that, after all these years of peace and happiness, human wickedness and ambition have brought the curse of war back again on earth."

"Yes," said Isma. "If there were anything in what the old astrologers used to say we could look upon his rising as an omen. And yet we have very little reason surely for taking as an emblem of war a world in which wars have been unheard of for thousands of years."

"I wonder when that time will come on earth?" said Alma bitterly. "If ever it does! We terrestrials seem to be too hopelessly wicked and foolish for such wisdom as that.

"Mankind will never have a fairer opportunity of working out its redemption than it had after the Terror, and yet here, after four generations of peaceful happiness and prosperity, the wickedness of one woman is able to set the world ablaze again. Our forefathers were wise, but they would have been wiser still if they had stamped that vile brood out utterly. Their evil blood has been the one drop of venom that has poisoned the whole world's cup of happiness!"

As Alma spoke these last words her grey eyes grew dark with sudden passion under her straight-drawn brows. Her breast heaved with a sudden wave of emotion, and the sentences came quickly and fiercely from the lips which Isma had never heard speak in anger before.

"Yes," she replied, rather sadly than angrily, "perhaps it would have been better for the world if they had done so, or, at anyrate, if they had shut them up for life, as they did the criminals and the insane in the middle of the last century. But we must remember, even in our own sorrow and anger, that this Olga Romanoff is in her way not altogether unlike our own Angel was in hers."

"Surely you're speaking sacrilege now!" interrupted Alma.

"How can the evil be like the good under any circumstances?"

"No, I am not," said Isma, with a smile. "Remember how Natasha was trained up by the Master in undying hate of Russian tyranny, and how she inherited the legacy of revenge from her mother and him. No doubt this Olga has done the same, and she has been taught to look upon us as the Terrorists looked upon the Tsar and his family.

"We are the descendants of those who flung her ancestor from his throne, extinguished his dynasty, and sent him to die in Siberia. I would kill her with my own hand if I could, and believe that I was ridding the world of a curse, but surely we two daughters of Aeria are wise enough to be just even to such an enemy as she is."

"But she has done worse than kill us," Alma almost hissed between her clenched teeth. "If she had a thousand lives and we took them one by one they would not expiate her crime against us, or equal the hopeless misery that she has brought upon us.

"What is mere death, the swift transition from one stage of existence to another, compared with the hopeless death-in-life to which her wanton wickedness has condemned you and me, or to the calamities which she has brought upon the world?"

"It is nothing, I grant you," said Isma. "But still I do not agree with you about that hopeless death-in-life, as you call it. Our present sorrow is great and heavy enough, God knows, but for me at least it is not hopeless, nor will it be for you when the first stress of the storm is over."

"What do you mean?" cried Alma, almost as fiercely as before, and leaning forward and looking through the dusk into her face as though she hardly credited her ears. "Do you mean to say that either you or I could ever"—

"Yes," said Isma, interrupting her, and speaking now with eager animation. "Yes, I mean just what you were going to say. And some day, I believe, you will think as I do."

Alma shook her head in mournful incredulity, and Isma noticing the gesture went on—

"Yes, you will! The reason that you do not agree with me now is that yours is a deeper and stronger nature than mine. You are like the sea, and I am like the lake. Your grief and anger struck you dumb at first.

"You were in a stupor when I found you on the terrace, and now the depths of your nature are broken up and the storm is raging, and until it is over you will see nothing but your own sorrow and anger.

"But with me the storm broke out at once, and I ran to my room and threw myself upon my bed and sobbed and wailed until my mother thought I was going mad. You have not wept yet, and it will be well for you when you do. Your nature is prouder than mine, and it will take longer to melt, but it must melt some time, for we are both women, after all, and then you will see hope through your tears, as I did."

Alma shook her head again, and said in a low, sad, steady voice—

"I can never see hope until I can see Alan as he was when he left me, and you know that is impossible."

"You will never see him again as he was," replied Isma gently. "But that is no reason why you should not see him better than he was."

"Better?" exclaimed Alma, with an involuntary note of scorn in her voice, which brought a quick flush to Isma's cheek, and a flash into her eyes for her brother's sake. "Better! How can that be?"

"Just as the man who has fallen and risen again of his own native strength, is better and stronger than the man who has never been tempted," replied Isma almost hotly.

"Remember the lessons we have learnt from the people of Mars since we learnt to communicate with them. You know how they have gone through civilisation after civilisation until they have refined everything out of human nature that makes it human except their animal existence and their intellectual faculties.

"They have no passions and they make no mistakes. What we call love they call sexual suitability, the mechanical arrange-

ment into which they have refined our ruling passion. Do you remember how almost impossible Vassilis, after he had perfected the code of signals, found it to make even their brightest and most advanced intellects understand the meaning of jealousy?"

The skilfully-aimed shot struck home instantly. A bright wave of colour swept from Alma's throat up to her brow. Her eyes shone like two pale fires in the dusk, and her hand grasped the rail on which it was resting till the bones and sinews stood out distinct in it. She seemed to gasp for breath a moment before she found her voice, but when she spoke her tone seemed to ring and vibrate like a bell in the sudden strength of her unloosed passion.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you innocent-looking little Isma! You are wiser than I am after all. I did not know the meaning of that word till Olga's letter fell from the sky, but I know it now. My God, how I hate that woman!"

"She is not a woman," replied Isma, speaking in the unconscious pride of her pure descent. "She is a baseborn animal, for she has used her beauty for the vilest ends, yet I am glad to hear you say that you hate her for Alan's sake, as I do, and—and for Alexis's. While you can hate you can love, and some day you will love Alan—the real Alan, not your ideal lover—all the better because you have hated Olga for his sake."

"What?" almost wailed Alma, in the intensity of her anger and misery. "After he has held her in his arms—after his lips have kissed hers—after"—

"Yes, even after that. When your first bitterness has passed, as mine has, you will be more just, and remember the influence under which he did so—if he did. Do you hold yourself responsible for what you think or do in your dreams, or do you not believe what Alan said in his letter about the drug? You know too much about chemistry not to know that such horrible poisons have existed for centuries."

"Yes, yes, I know that, and I know that he has no share in the moral guilt; but how can I ever forget he has been what

those cruel words of Olga's told us she had made of him?" replied Alma, her face growing cold and hard again as she spoke.

"Alma," said Isma, with gentle dignity, yet with a note of keen reproach in her voice, "surely you are forgetting that you are speaking of my brother as well as of your lover. No, I am not angry, for I am too sad myself not to understand your sorrow. But I want you to remember that I who have lost both a lover and a brother am asking you to be patient and to hope with me.

"We have never seen Alan and Alexis as they are. We only remember them as two handsome boys who had never seen or known evil. When we meet them again, as I firmly believe we shall, they will be men who have passed through the fire; for if they do not pass through it and come out stronger and better than they were, rest assured we shall never meet on earth again.

"Alan would no more come to you now than you would go to him. When he believes himself worthy of you he will come for you as Alexis will come for me, and then"—

She stopped short in her eloquent pleading, for Alma, at last melted and overcome by her sweet unselfishness and loving logic, had felt the springs of her own woman's nature unloosed, and with a low, wailing cry had sunk down upon the cushions towards her, and was sobbing out her sorrow on her lap. Isma said nothing more, for her end was achieved. She laid her left hand caressingly on Alma's hair, and with her right she pulled the steering-lever back and swung the *Cygna* round until her prow pointed towards home again.

When they reached the villa they found the President's private yacht resting on the terrace, for Alan's father and mother had come over after the Council meeting to discuss with Alma's parents the more intimate family aspect of the strange events which had cleared up in such terrible fashion the mystery which had so long shrouded the fate of the sons of the two chief families in Aeria.

So revolting was the idea of their mental servitude to such

an enemy of the human race as they could not but believe Olga Romanoff to be, and so frightful were the consequences that must infallibly befall humanity in consequence of it, that their parents would rather have known them dead than living under such degrading circumstances. To the Aerians, far advanced as they were beyond the standards of the present day, both in religion and philosophy, the conception of death was one which included no terrors and no more regret than was natural and common to all humanity at parting with a kinsman or a friend.

As they were destined to prove, when face to face with a crisis unparalleled in the history of humanity, they regarded death merely as a natural and necessary transition from one state of existence to another, which would be higher or lower according to the preponderance of good or evil done in this life.

If, therefore, the parents and kinsmen of those who were now exiles and wanderers upon the ocean wastes could have chosen, they would infinitely rather have known that Alan and Alexis had shared the fate of their companions in the Norwegian snowdrift than they would have learnt that for six years they had been the slaves and playthings of a woman who, as they guessed from Alan's letter, combined the ambition of a Semiramis with the vices of a Messalina, and who had used the skill and knowledge which they had acquired and inherited as Princes of the Air with the avowed purpose of subverting the dominion of Aeria, undoing all that their ancestors had done, and bringing back the evil era of strife, bloodshed, and political slavery.

So, too, with Alma. As she had told Isma, she would a thousand times rather have seen her lover dead than degraded to such base uses. Although she, like everyone else in Aeria, admitted that the strange circumstances absolved both Alan and Alexis from all moral blame and responsibility, she, in common with her own father and mother, and perhaps, also, with others not less intimately concerned, found it impossible to forget or ignore the taint of such an association, and to look upon it as a stain that might never be washed away.

Indeed, the only member of the family council who openly proclaimed her belief that the two exiles would, if ever they returned, come back to Aeria better and stronger men than those who had known no evil was Isma, who repeated, with all the winning eloquence at her command, all the arguments that she had used to Alma during their cruise together. Whether Alma and the others would ever come round to her view could of course only be proved by time, but it is nevertheless certain that when the family council at last separated the hearts of its members were less sore than they would have been had Alan and Alexis not possessed such an advocate as the girl who had so good a double reason for pleading their causes.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BATTLE OF KERGUELEN.

HE Council of Aeria possessed, as has already been said, four-and-twenty stations, scattered over the oceans of the world, which it used as depôts for the submarine fleets, by means of which, acting in co-operation with its aerial squadrons, it had made any attempt at naval warfare hopeless until the disasters described at the beginning of this book proved that an enemy, in this respect at least, more powerful than itself, had successfully challenged its empire of the sea.

Of these stations the most important in the Southern hemisphere was that on Kerguelen Island, or Desolation Land, situated at the intersection of the 49th parallel of south latitude with the 69th meridian of east longitude. This lonely fragment of land in the midst of the ocean, barren of surface, and swept by the almost constant storms of long winters, had been chosen, first, because of its situation on the southern limits of the Indian Ocean, equidistant between Africa and Australia, and, secondarily, because of its numerous and sheltered deep-water harbours, so admirably adapted for vessels which were perfectly independent of storm.

Added to this, the island contained large supplies of coal, from which the motive-power of both the submarine vessels and the air-ships was now derived by direct conversion of its solar energy into electrical force through the secret processes known only to the President and two members of the Council.

So far the Russians had not ventured to make any attack upon this stronghold, so strongly was it defended, not only by its submarine squadrons and systems of mines, guarding the entrances to all the harbours, but also by the large force of air-ships which had been stationed there since the new naval warfare had broken out.

The warning which Alan had conveyed in his letter to his father was based on the knowledge that a general attack was soon to be made upon it both by air and sea, with the object of crippling the power of the Aerians in the Southern Ocean. No time had been lost in acting upon this warning. The aerial squadron was increased to forty, with the *Ariel* as flag-ship, and twenty new submarine vessels, the largest and best possessed by the Aerians, had been despatched from Port Natal to reinforce the fleet of thirty-five already at Kerguelen Island. With these must of course be counted the *Narwhal*, under the command of Alan and Alexis.

The strength of the attacking force could only be guessed at, as even Alan did not know it, but it was not expected that, however strong a force the Russians might bring up by sea, they would be able, after the disaster of Antarctica, to muster more than a dozen air-ships.

The Aerian headquarters was at Christmas Harbour, on the northern shore of the island. This is an admirably-sheltered inlet running westward into the land between Cape François and Arch Point, and its upper and narrower half forms an oval basin nearly a mile long by a quarter of a mile broad, walled in by high perpendicular basaltic cliffs, and containing a depth of water varying from two to sixteen fathoms, as compared with twenty-five to thirty fathoms in its outer half.

North of the harbour, Table Mount rises to a height of thirteen hundred feet, and to the south is a huge mass of basalt over eleven hundred feet high. On both of these elevations were mounted batteries of guns capable of throwing projectiles of great size and enormous explosive energy to a distance of several miles. There were altogether twelve of these batteries placed on various heights about the island, and the guns

composing them were mounted on swivels, which enabled them to be trained so as to throw the projectile either into the sea or high up into the air.

Soon after daybreak on the fourth day after Alan's letter had been received the outlook on Cape François, a bold mass of basalt to the north of the outer bay, telephoned "*Narwhal* in sight" to the settlement at the head of the harbour. Immediately on this message being received the commander of the station, named Max Ernstein, a man of about thirty-four, and the most daring and skilful submarine navigator and engineer in the service of the Council, went on board his own vessel, the *Cachalot*, and set out to welcome the long-lost son of the President and convey to him the commission which had been sent out by air-ship from Aeria.

The *Cachalot*, which may as well be described here as elsewhere as a type of the submarine warship of the time, was a double-pointed cylinder, built of plates of nickelised aluminium steel, not riveted, but electrically fused at the joints, so that they formed a continuous mass equally impervious all over, and presenting no seams or overlaps.

The cylinder was a hundred and fifty feet from point to point, with a midship's diameter of forty feet. The forward end was armed with a sheathing of azurine, the metal peculiar to the mines of Aeria, which would cut and pierce steel as a diamond cuts glass. This sheathing formed a ram, which was by no means the least formidable portion of the warship's armament.

The upper part of the cylinder was flattened so as to form an oval deck forty feet long by fifteen wide. A centre section of this deck, three feet wide, could be opened by means of a lateral slide which allowed of the elevation of a gun twenty-five feet long, which could be used either for discharging torpedoes by water or for throwing projectiles through the air.

It could be aimed and fired from below the deck without the artillerists even seeing the objects aimed at, save in an arrangement of mirrors, so adjusted that when the object appeared in

the centre of the lowest of them, the gun could be fired with the certainty of the projectile reaching its mark. Four under-water torpedo tubes, two ahead and two astern, completed the armament of the submarine warship.

When under water the deck could be hermetically closed, and sliding plates could be drawn over the opening of the torpedo tubes, so that from stem to stern of the cylinder there were no excrescences to impede the progress of the vessel through the water with the sole exception of a dome of thick forged glass just forward of the deck, under which stood the helmsman, who gave place to the commander of the vessel when she went into action. Her powerful four-bladed screw, driven by engines almost precisely similar to those of the air-ships, gave her a maximum speed of a hundred miles an hour.

The *Cachalot* ran at twenty-five miles an hour down the harbour, and as soon as he got abreast of Cape François Captain Ernstein, who was standing on deck, saw a small red flag apparently rising from the waves about a mile to seaward. A similar flag was soon flying from a movable flagstaff on the *Cachalot*, and a few minutes later she was lying alongside the *Narwhal*.

This vessel was a very leviathan of the deep, and as she lay three parts submerged in the water Captain Ernstein calculated that she could hardly be less than two hundred feet in length and forty-five in diameter amidships. She appeared to be built on very much the same plan as the *Cachalot* and of the same materials, saving only, of course, the ram of azurine, which was replaced by one of nickel steel.

As the *Cachalot* got alongside, a slide was drawn back in the deck of the *Narwhal* and the head and shoulders of a man dressed in close-fitting seal-fur appeared. It was Alan, little changed in physical appearance since the fatal day that he invited Olga Romanoff on board the *Ithuriel*, save that he had grown a moustache and beard, which he wore trimmed somewhat in the Elizabethan style, and that the frank, open expression of the boy had given place to a grave, almost sad, sternness, which marked the man who had lived and suffered.

Max Ernstein recognised him at once and saluted as though greeting a superior officer, for, although all the Aerians were friends and comrades, the etiquette of rank and discipline was scrupulously observed amongst them when on active service.

"What do you salute me for?" said Alan gravely, as he reached the deck and came to the side on which the *Cachalot* lay. "Do you not see that I am no longer wearing the golden wings? Are you the officer in command of the station?"

"Yes, Admiral Arnold," returned the other, in the same formal tone and at the same time presenting the letter from the Council. "I suppose you have forgotten me. I am Max Ernstein, in command of the naval fleet at Kerguelen. That letter will explain why I saluted and why I have come to hand over my command to you."

Before he replied Alan ran his eye rapidly over the letter. As he did so the pale bronze of his face flushed crimson for a moment, and he turned his head away from Ernstein, brushed his hand quickly across his eyes, and then read the letter again more deliberately. Then he turned and said in a voice that he vainly strove to keep steady—

"This is more than I have deserved or could expect, but obedience is the first duty, so I accept the command. Come on board, Ernstein; of course I recognised you, but until I knew how I stood with the Council I looked upon myself as an outlaw, and therefore no friend or comrade for you."

The captain of the *Cachalot* had a gangway-plank brought up and passed from one vessel to the other, and in another moment he was standing beside Alan on the deck of the *Narwhal*, and their hands were joined in a firm clasp.

"That's the first honest hand that I have grasped for six years, except Alexis'," said Alan, as he returned the clasp with a grip that showed his physical forces had been by no means impaired by his long mental servitude. "Come down into the cabin, we shall find him there."

He led the way below, and as soon as Alexis had been told the unexpected good news, which seemed to affect him even more deeply than it had Alan, the three sat down at the table

in the saloon of the *Narwhal*, a plain but comfortably furnished room, about twenty-five feet long by fifteen broad and ten high, to discuss a plan of operations in view of the expected attack on the station.

Alan at once assumed the authority with which he had been invested by the Council, and made minute inquiries into the nature and extent of the defending force at his disposal.

"I think that ought to be quite sufficient, not only to defeat, but pretty well destroy any force that the Russians can bring against us," said Alan, as soon as Ernstein had finished his description. "We have much more to fear from the air-ships than from the submarine boats, because the *Narwhal* would give a very good account of them, even by herself. Have any more vessels of the type of the *Ithuriel* been built since the old *Ithuriel* was lost?"

"Yes," replied Ernstein; "but only ten, I am sorry to say. One of them is here, as I told you just now, but we have forty of the others, and I don't suppose the Russians can bring more than a dozen against us."

"What do you mean?" said Alan. "They have fifty, every one of them as fast and as powerful as the old *Ithuriel*. I ought to know," he continued grimly, "for they were every one of them built under my own eyes."

"I beg your pardon," said Ernstein. "I ought to have told you before now that we have already won our first victory, and that though we lost eight vessels we destroyed twenty of the Russians'." And then he went on to give Alan and Alexis a rapid description of the pursuit of the *Revenge*, and the havoc wrought at the end of it by the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*.

"That is glorious news!" said Alan. "But they have thirty ships at their disposal still, and I expect they will bring at least twenty of these against us, and they are all swifter than ours saving only the *Ariel*. Of course my command ends with the shore, but I think it will be as well if the captain of the *Ariel* were to come on board the *Narwhal* so that we could arrange our plans of defence together—I for the sea, and he for the air."

"But why not come ashore and see him?" said Ernstein. "He and all of us will be delighted to see you on the island."

"No," said Alan, shaking his head. "Alexis and I have promised each other never to leave the *Narwhal* until the Russian sea power is crippled. The day that we set foot on dry land again will be the day that we give back the supremacy of the sea to the Council, so if we two Admirals of the Sea and Air are to meet, the commander of the *Ariel* must come here."

"Very well," said Ernstein. "I understand you. Write a note and I will send the *Cachalot* back with it. She will bring him back in under half an hour, for he was up at the settlement when I left."

Alan wrote the letter forthwith, and the *Cachalot* departed, returning, as her captain had said, in less than half an hour, with Edward Forrest, the commander of the *Ariel*. He was a lean, wiry, active man of about forty-five, of mixed English, Scotch, and Aerian descent, with short, crisp, curly black hair and smooth-shaven face, rather sharp, regular features, and a pair of keen grey eyes which seemed to look into the very brain of the person he was talking to—a man of prompt decisions and few words, and one of the most able aerial navigators that Aeria could boast of.

He held the rank of admiral, and was responsible for the station of Kerguelen, and the command of the southern seas. He greeted Alan and Alexis courteously, but a trifle stiffly, as though he thought that their indiscretion had been somewhat lightly dealt with by the Council. This, however, was no business of his, for the first law of Aeria was that the decisions of the President and Council were not open to criticism by any private or official citizen whatever his rank or experience.

Therefore, after reading, as a matter of form, the commission sent to Alan and Alexis, he addressed himself at once to the business of the moment, and before they had been discussing the plan of defence for many minutes he was forced to admit to himself that the President's son, young as he was, was more than his master both in aerial and naval tactics.

For the greater part of the morning plan after plan was suggested, thrashed out, and either accepted or thrown aside, and when he took his leave he shook hands with both Alan and Alexis far more cordially than he had done in greeting, and said with brief, blunt candour—

"This is not the first time that a woman has used a man to upset the peace of the world, and I tell you honestly that I once thought you had both turned traitors. I don't think so now, and I am heartily glad you are back. If you could only have returned three years ago a lot of trouble might have been saved, but I must confess that you have both learnt more in five years than I have in twenty. I will follow your instructions to the letter."

"What is done is done," said Alan, smiling, and yet with a grave dignity that showed Admiral Forrest that, despite all that had happened, he was standing in the presence of his master. "The work in hand now is to regain what we have lost, and if every man does his duty we shall do so. I think everything is arranged now, and as we have no time to lose I will say good-morning."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Admiral Forrest took his dismissal and his leave at the same time.

Captain Ernstein took six men out of the *Cachalot* and placed them at the disposal of Alan and Alexis, for the working of the *Narwhal*, and then took his leave to execute his part of the plan of defence.

It was a bitterly cold day, for the southern winter had already set in in all its severity. The sea to the north of the island was comparatively smooth, but swept every now and then with violent gusts of wind from the southward. The sky was entirely covered by thick masses of cold grey cloud, every now and then torn up into great rolling masses by the sudden blasts of icy wind from the pole, which drove fierce storms of hard frozen snow across the bare and desolate island.

But the roughness of the elements was a matter of small concern to the crews of the air-ships and the submarine

cruisers, for both were independent alike of sea and storm. The former could literally ride upon the wings of the fiercest gale that ever blew. Their interiors were warm and windproof, and their machinery was powerful enough to drive them four and five times as fast as the air-currents in which they floated, while the latter had only to sink a few feet below the level of the waves to find perfect calm.

The days, in short, were past when men had been at the mercy of the elements, and so the atmospheric conditions which would have made a modern naval attack upon a rocky and exposed coast almost impossible were not even taken into account in preparing to meet the threatened assault on Kerguelen Island.

No one knew when or how the first assault would be delivered. All that was known was that, unless Olga and her advisers had completely altered their plans, the attack would take place either that day or the next, and consequently ceaseless vigilance was necessary on sea and land and in the air.

In accordance with the plan arranged on board the *Narwhal*, ten air-ships rose above the clouds to an altitude of five thousand feet, and from each of these an electric thread hung down to as many signal-stations on the island, all of which were connected with the headquarters at the top of Christmas Harbour.

Twenty cruisers patrolled the coast at a distance of a mile from the land, and two miles outside these the *Narwhal* ran to and fro along the northern shore. All the more important inlets which had sufficient depth of water for submarine attack were guarded with mines and chains of torpedoes, so disposed that no vessel could possibly enter without firing them, and so giving warning of the locality of the attack.

The afternoon passed without any alarm, and at nightfall the clouds sent down a blinding storm of snow, which, added to the intense darkness, made vision impossible both on land and sea, although high above the clouds the ten air-ships floated in a calm, clear atmosphere, under the brilliant constellations of the southern hemisphere.

No attack seemed possible without warning, either by sea or above the clouds, for the hostile air-ships could not approach without being seen from a great distance through the clear, starlit sky, and without their lights, which would instantly betray their presence, it was impossible for the submarine vessels even to find the coast.

Hour after hour passed, and still no hostile sign rewarded the vigilance of the defenders. No one of the present day could have guessed that all the preparations had been made for such a battle as had never been fought before on sea or land, or in the air.

Nothing was visible but the snow-covered earth and the storm-swept sea, for the sentinel ships, floating far above the clouds, were beyond the reach of vision. And yet, if the combined fleets of the modern world had attacked Kerguelen that night, not a ship would have escaped to tell the tale of annihilation, so terrible were the engines of destruction which waited but the signal of battle to strike their swift and irresistible blows.

It was about half-past six o'clock the next morning when Alexis, who was on watch in the conning-tower of the *Narwhal*, saw a faint beam of light illuminating the water a long way ahead. He instantly signalled to Alan—"Enemy in sight. Back. I am going to ram."

Alan, unwilling to leave the new crew, who were not yet perfectly acquainted with the working of the machinery, had taken command of the engine-room alternately with Alexis, who was now taking his four hours' watch in the conning-tower, and to whom the fortune of war had given the honour of striking the first blow. The *Narwhal* backed rapidly, and as she did so Alexis turned a small wheel in the side of the conning-tower, and the whole chamber sank into the hull of the vessel.

As soon as it stopped he pulled a lever and a heavy steel sheet slid over the opening where the glass dome had been. In front of him as he stood at the steering-wheel was a long, very slender needle hung with extreme delicacy on a pivot, up which an electric current constantly passed.

This needle was terrestrially insulated by a magnet which always swung opposite to the magnetic pole, and when acted upon only by the steel of the vessel's fabric, swung indifferently as long as there was no other vessel within a thousand yards of the *Narwhal*. But the moment one came within that distance the needle pointed towards it with unerring accuracy, as it was doing at the present moment.

Alexis allowed the vessel to back until he saw the needle begin to waver. Then he knew that the thousand-yard limit had been reached, and signalled—

"Full speed ahead."

The next moment the engines were reversed and the *Narwhal* bore down on her invisible prey. The needle became rigid again. Alexis kept it pointing dead ahead as the *Narwhal* gathered way and rushed silently but with irresistible force upon her victim.

She passed over the thousand yards in forty seconds. Then came a dull, rending crash, a slight shiver of the mighty fabric, and then she swept on her way as though she had passed through a couple of inches of planking instead of the steel hull of a submarine warship more than two-thirds her own size.

And so in silence and darkness, without the discharge of a gun or the flash of a shot or an audible cry of human pain, the work of death and destruction began and ended. In the passing of an instant a warship had been destroyed which could have annihilated a fleet of modern battleships in detail without once appearing above the surface of the water.

The moment that the shock told Alexis that the ram of the *Narwhal* had done its work, he signalled "Stop," and as the vessel slowed down he watched the momentous fluctuations of the needle in front of him. It oscillated for an instant and then became still again, pointing to another victim hidden away somewhere under the dark waters. He brought the vessel round until it pointed ahead again, and then once more the leviathan plunged forward at full speed on her errand of destruction.

Thirty seconds later a rasping tearing sound, told him that he had ripped the side out of a second Russian vessel; and again he stopped, and again the fatal tell-tale needle pointed to a mark on which he hurled his irresistible ram. So the work went on, and vessel after vessel was torn to pieces and sunk in the midst of the darkness and silence of the wintry sea, without even a warning having been given either to the consorts of the destroyed vessels or to those nearer in shore, all of which were, of course, outside the range of the needle's indication. But for this fact Alexis would have been unable to do his work, for he would not have known whether he was ramming friend or foe.

When the ram had found its mark for the twelfth time, the needle oscillated vaguely to and fro, showing that within a thousand-yards radius at least there were no more victims to be found. Then the *Narwhal* rose to the surface of the water, and Alexis resumed his watch as the vessel patrolled the coast again at a speed of fifty miles an hour.

Alan now came and relieved Alexis from his watch. As he entered the conning-tower he said—

"How many is that you've settled? A dozen, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Alexis, "but I can hardly think they can have been anything but scouts, and so we shall have the main fleet to tackle yet."

"Do you think any of them have got through?" said Alan. "You know they may have approached from east and west as well, and if so they are lying inside of us."

"No," replied Alexis, "I don't think they would do that. You see we have the advantage of them in this way. They can't see ten yards in front of them unless there is bright sunshine on the water, or unless they turn their lights on to the full, in which case they would betray their presence at once.

"Then they don't know what has become of the *Narwhal*, and probably think that she has been attacked by an overwhelming force, or blown up by some lucky torpedo. They daren't go inshore in force for fear of springing a mine, and

so you may depend upon it the twelve we have destroyed were scouts, prowling about very slowly and waiting for daylight to examine the coast and find a way into Christmas Harbour.

"They must have been in single line, and we had the luck to catch one of the end ones first, and so we sank the lot in the order in which they were floating. I don't think we can do anything more till daylight except run up and down the coast and keep a sharp look-out to seaward and on the needle."

"I suppose you're right," said Alan. "You'd better go and get an hour's sleep if you can."

"There won't be much sleep for any of us till to-night," said Alexis quickly, pointing to the clouds over the island. "Look! the row has begun in the air already."

Alan glanced up and saw a series of intensely bright flashes stream downwards through the clouds, which at the same moment were rent and rolled up into vast shadowy billows by some tremendous concussion of the atmosphere above them. There could be only one explanation of this. The attack on the island had begun from the air, and the flashes were those of the first shots of the aerial bombardment.

What had really happened was this.

A fleet of fifty submarine warships, under the command of Michael Lossenski, the eldest son of Orloff Lossenski, who was now Olga Romanoff's chief adviser in the conduct of the war that she had commenced with the Aerians, had reached the northern coast of Kerguelen Island about four o'clock in the morning in order to co-operate with an aerial squadron of fifteen vessels led by the *Revenge*, under the command, nominally, of Lossenski's second son Boris, but really of Olga herself.

As Alexis had surmised, the twelve vessels destroyed by the *Narwhal* were scouts sent out to, if possible, feel their way to the entrance of Christmas Harbour, which was known to be the headquarters of the station.

These were to have returned to the fleet with all the intelligence they could get as to bearings and soundings, and the

THE CLOUDS WERE RENT AND ROLLED UP INTO VAST SHADOWY BILLOWS.

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position of mines and the defending fleet. Then at daybreak, that is to say about eight o'clock, the whole squadron was to have advanced to the entrance to the harbour, ramming any of the defenders who barred their way, and then, after sending a swarm of torpedoes into the mouth of the bay to explode the mines and blow up any submarine defences that might exist, to have made a rush for the inner bay at the same time that the air-ships engaged the land defences.

The naval portion of the programme was completely frustrated by the destruction of the scouts, while the aerial attack was foiled by the look-outs stationed above the clouds. Soon after seven it became light enough at their altitude for the powerful glasses of their commanders to make out the fifteen Russian air-ships coming up from the southward at a distance of about twenty miles.

A few minutes later they were themselves discovered by the Russians, and Olga, to her intense chagrin, saw at a glance that all hope of a surprise was gone. By some means or other the Aerians had received intelligence of the attack, and were ready for it.

The terrible experience taught by the disaster of Antarctica warned her and her lieutenants that any approach, now that they were seen, must be made with the utmost caution, for they had no precise knowledge as to the range of the Aerian guns. All they knew was that it was very great, and that where one of their projectiles found its mark destruction followed instantly.

Added to this, there was another difficulty. The dense masses of cloud completely hid both sea and land from their view, and made accurate shooting at the land defences impossible. Consequently there was nothing for it but to fight the battle out in the upper regions of the air, against a force of whose actual strength they were ignorant. They dare not attempt to surround the ten air-ships, which hung stationary over the island, for this meant bringing all their guns into play, while they could only use half of their own.

While they were debating on a plan of operations, two new

factors in the coming struggle were swiftly and unexpectedly brought into play. As soon as the news of their arrival had been telegraphed to headquarters, the *Ariel* took the air and passed under the clouds to the rear of the Russian squadron. Ten miles behind them, she swept round sharply, and with her wings inclined to the utmost, and her engines working at the fullest capacity, she took a mighty upward swoop, passed through the clouds like a flash of light, and before the Russians knew what had happened, she was floating three thousand feet above them, out of reach of their guns, and hurling projectile after projectile into their midst. Three of their ships, struck almost simultaneously, were torn into a thousand fragments, and vanished through the clouds.

It was the glare and shock of this explosion that Alexis had seen from the conning-tower of the *Narwhal*. The remaining Russian ships instantly scattered and sank through the clouds to seek a refuge from the foe whose deadly blows they were completely unable to return.

But the moment they appeared on the under-side of the cloud-sea, all the guns of the land batteries opened fire in all directions with time-shells, and so rapid were the discharges, and so terrible the energy of the explosives, that the whole firmament above the island seemed ablaze with them, while the concussions of the nether atmosphere were so tremendous and continuous, that it would have been madness for the Russian air-ships to have approached within the zone of fire with which the Aerians had covered and encircled their positions.

The clouds were torn and broken up into vast whirling masses, which completely obscured the view of the Russians, and rendered anything like accurate shooting in the direction of the island impossible. Worse than this, the range of the great land guns, fired at an elevation of forty-five degrees, was so enormous that they were forced by the incessantly exploding projectiles, which were hurled up into the air in all directions, to retire to a distance which, beyond the most random shooting, the results of which were spent upon the rocks of the island and the sea, rendered their own guns useless.

Rise up through the clouds they dare not, for they knew the *Ariel* was still there, and that the first ship that showed herself would be an almost helpless mark for one of the ten guns which, for the time being, commanded the heavens. There seemed nothing for it but an ignominious retreat, for, as Boris Lossenski said to Olga when, furious with rage and mortification, she reproached him with a lack both of skill and courage, an attack upon a volcano in full eruption would have been child's play to an assault at close quarters on Kerguelen Island.

Their one hope of success had lain in a surprise, and that, by some unaccountable means, had been made impossible. They had reckoned only on the air-ships and the submarine defences, and even these they had expected to take unawares. The terrible power of the battery guns, which were able to spread their seas of fire through the air and to shake the very firmament itself with their projectiles, had been a revelation to them.

They could not train their own guns without seeing their mark, and neither flame nor smoke betrayed the position of the batteries, while on the other hand the artillerists on the island had simply to surround the station with a zone of fire and a continuous series of atmospheric convulsions through which no air-ship could have passed without the risk of overturning or completely collapsing.

So Olga was at last convinced that her choice lay between abandonment of the attack or running the gauntlet of fire in the almost forlorn hope of engaging the land batteries and an aerial fleet of unknown strength at close quarters.

Baffled and defeated, and yet convinced that to continue the unequal contest under its present conditions would be merely to court still more disastrous defeat, and even probable destruction, Olga at last allowed Lossenski to give the signal for retreat, and the Russian squadron withdrew to a position twelve miles northward of the island. Its departure was seen both from the air and the land, and the cannonade immediately stopped.

Meanwhile Alan had run the *Narwhal* into the mouth of Christmas Harbour flying his red flag. He was met by the *Cachalot*, and, after telling Captain Ernstein what he had done, and learning of the repulse of the Russians in the aerial battle, he directed forty of the submarine vessels to follow him out to sea to look for the Russian flotilla.

All the craft were furnished with tell-tale needles similar to the one on board the *Narwhal*, for it is impossible to see a sufficient distance under water to effectively attack an enemy as agile as the submarine warships were, and this fact had led to the universal employment of the needles.

As it was now quite light, the whole Aerian squadron, with the exception of five vessels whose duty it was to act as scouts under water, proceeded seaward on the surface of the waves, keeping a sharp look-out for the remains of the Russian fleet, which they soon discovered lying about five miles off the island. They could make out thirty-five of the long, black, half-submerged hulls lying together like a school of whales with the waves breaking over them as over sunken rocks.

Alan immediately signalled from his conning-tower in the manual sign-language, used by the Aerians to communicate between their air-ships, to his consorts, and ordered them to scatter and form a wide circle round the Russian squadron at a distance of a mile, and a depth of two fathoms, but on no account to approach within a thousand yards of them. When they had reached their positions they were to rise to the surface and each was to discharge a couple of torpedoes towards the centre of the circle. After that they were to retire and leave the rest to him.

The moment the order had been passed through the fleet, everyone of the vessels disappeared and proceeded to her station. The *Narwhal* sank at the same time until nothing but the glass dome of her conning-tower remained above the water.

By carefully noting the course steered by the compass, and accurately measuring the distance travelled by the number of revolutions of the propeller, each captain was able to place his craft in the desired position.

So perfectly, indeed, was the manœuvre performed that when the vessels rose to the surface they formed a circle two miles in diameter, in the centre of which lay, within a space of about two hundred yards square, the Russian flotilla, the commanders of which, afraid to advance nearer to the shore without the intelligence which they still awaited from their scouts, and confounded by the awful spectacle presented by the aerial battle, of the issue of which they were utterly ignorant, were waiting in bewilderment and indecision the issue of the events which had taken such a marvellous and unexpected turn.

The manœuvre ordered by Alan had been executed so promptly and secretly that the Russians were not even aware that they were surrounded until torpedo after torpedo, coming in from all points of the compass, began exploding in their midst, hurling vast masses of water and foam up into the air, tearing their plates and crippling their propellers, and disabling half their number before they had time to recover from the confusion into which the sudden attack had thrown them.

To communicate signals from one vessel to another under such circumstances was impossible, and so united action was out of the question. All that the captains of the vessels could see was that there were enemies upon all sides of them. The explosion of the eighty torpedoes had churned the water up into a mass of seething foam, in the midst of which fifteen vessels were lying crippled and helpless on the surface, while six more had been sent to the bottom.

This was bad enough, but while the captains of those which had escaped were recovering from the stupefaction into which this sudden disaster had thrown them Alan saw his chance, and as soon as the last torpedo had exploded headed the *Narwhal* full speed into the midst of them. Then followed a scene which would have beggared all description.

The great ship, moving at a speed of nearly three miles a minute, tore her way through the half-crippled squadron, hurling everything she struck to the bottom of the sea. Every

Russian vessel that was able to do so after the first assault sank out of the way of the terrible ram of the *Narwhal* and headed off at full speed into the open sea.

But for those that were partially or wholly disabled there was no escape. Alan standing in his conning-tower, his teeth clenched and his blue eyes almost black with the fierce passion of battle and revenge, whirled his steering-wheel this way and that, and as the steel monster swung round in rapid curves in obedience to the rudder, he hurled her again and again upon his practically helpless victims, piercing them through and through as though their plates had been cardboard instead of steel.

When the last one had gone down he left the conning-tower, hoisted his flagstaff, and flew a signal to his consorts to return to harbour. What had become of the Russian vessels that had escaped he neither knew nor, for the present, cared.

The victory of the Aerians both at sea and in the air was complete, and he was certain that the Russians had received such a lesson as would convince them that Kerguelen Island was impregnable to any assault that they could make upon it, unless they were able to take its defenders by surprise—a contingency which was justly considered impossible.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SYREN'S STRONGHOLD.

AS soon as the first pitched battle in the world-war was over, a lengthy and detailed report of the attack on Kerguelen and its repulse was drawn up by Alan, Captain Ernstein, and Admiral Forrest for presentation to the Council. To this report Alan added a supplement, which is here reproduced in his own words.

"From what I know of the designs of Olga Romanoff and her advisers I am convinced that the defeats which have been inflicted upon them will merely have the effect of checking, and not putting a stop to, their operations against the peace and freedom of the world.

"I have seen and heard enough during the last five years to feel satisfied that there exists a very widespread conspiracy, the object of which is the restoration of the Romanoff dynasty, in the person of Olga, the breaking up of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, and the inauguration of an era of personal despotism and popular slavery.

"As far as we have been able to learn, this conspiracy embraces practically all the descendants of those families who lost their rank, official position, or property during the reconstitution of Russia after the fall of the Romanoffs. These people have, of course, everything to gain and not much to lose by the destruction of the present order of things, and Olga has promised them, no doubt quite sincerely, that in the event

of her triumph they shall be restored to all that their ancestors lost.

"As a matter of fact, the greater part of Russia will be divided amongst them should she ever accomplish her designs. The old order of things, as it existed before the days of Alexander II., is to be completely reinstated. The lower orders of the people are to be reduced once more to serfdom, and the trading classes to a condition very little better.

"If they resist they are to be terrorised into submission by the air-ships, and all who raise their voices for freedom are to be banished to Siberia, which is once more to be the prison-land of the Russian Empire. A large standing army is to be kept constantly on the war-footing, while the sea navy and the aerial fleet are to be kept up to such a strength as to be able to hold the rest of the Continent in practical subjection.

"In short, Olga aspires to nothing less than the throne of an empire which shall stretch from the Yellow Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. I am afraid, too, that there can be no doubt but that this conspiracy is not only favoured, but actually assisted, by large numbers of people throughout the Federation area.

"In fact, during the latter part of our stay at Mount Terror, the stronghold was visited by men of all nations, who, of course, came and went away in the submarine vessels, and who openly promised to do everything they could to further what they called the cause of the New Revolution in their own countries, on the understanding that the old evils of capitalism and private ownership of land by which their ancestors had grown wealthy are to be restored.

"This will, I trust, be enough to show you that the triumph of Olga Romanoff means nothing less than the complete undoing of all the work that was done in the days of the Terror.

"We have proved so far that Kerguelen, and, therefore, Aeria, is impregnable to attack save by surprise, which will now, of course, be impossible. But, on the other hand, the force at the disposal of Olga and her allies is still so strong that

all our present resources will have to be kept constantly employed to protect ourselves, and this leaves the world at the mercy of any Power which can obtain the assistance of the Russians' aerial navy, which still numbers twenty-seven vessels, all equal to our best ships.

"In addition to these they possess a submarine navy of at least forty vessels, all of which are swifter and more powerful than ours, with the exception of the *Narwhal*. I therefore suggest that the whole of the resources at the command of the Council shall at once be devoted to the building of at least fifty air-ships of the *Ithuriel* type, and the same number of submarine battleships like the *Narwhal*, complete plans of which I enclose.

"Until this additional force is at our command, I think it would be useless to attempt the destruction of the Russian stronghold in Antarctica, and until this is destroyed there can be no hope of peace. This stronghold, which I will now attempt to describe for the information of the Council, is one of the most marvellous places on earth.

"It lies in and about Mount Terror and the Parry Mountains, which run from it towards the pole behind the ice-barrier of Antarctica. Nearly ten years ago a Russian explorer named Kishenov reached the ice-barrier and made the discoveries which have enabled the Russian revolutionists to create their stronghold. In addition to his ship, he took with him three aerostats, which were chiefly constructed during his voyage, and also a small submarine vessel, which he took out in sections and put together at sea.

"He skirted the coast of Victoria Land, and was stopped by the ice in latitude 78°, as all other Antarctic explorers by sea have been since the voyage of Sir James Ross. The season was a singularly fine and open one, and two days after his arrival he inflated one of his aerostats and crossed the great barrier, to make a thorough exploration of the unknown land. Kishenov was the first man, not an Aerian, who had ever seen what there was on the other side of the Antarctic ice-wall.

"But he discovered far more than our explorers did, for

while he was in the neighbourhood of Mount Terror an earthquake, accompanying a violent eruption of Mount Erebus, made a huge fissure in the south side of Mount Terror. After waiting three days to make sure that the earthquake had subsided, he and two of his officers entered the crevice, which they found to be over two hundred feet wide at the level of the land ice.

"Furnished with storage batteries and electric lights, they penetrated into the interior of the mountain and found that it was pierced in all directions with great galleries and enormous chambers, hollowed out by volcanic forces during the period of Mount Terror's activity. Four days were spent altogether in exploring this subterranean region, the existence of which was kept a profound secret by Kishenov and his officers.

"Not the least strange and, as it has proved, one of the most valuable portions of his discovery was the finding of a subterranean lake in the heart of Mount Terror, the temperature of which was kept far above the freezing point by the heat which the interior of the mountain derived from the neighbouring fires of Mount Erebus. Finding the lake to be salt water, he concluded that it must have some connection with the open sea, and so the next day he and the same two officers entered the submarine boat and penetrated underneath the ice-barrier.

"After a search of five hours, the search-lights of the boat revealed a huge tunnel leading south-west into the land, that is to say, direct for Mount Terror. They followed this tunnel up for a distance of nearly five miles, and then struck the end. They now rose, and finally found themselves floating on the surface of the lake in the interior of the mountain.

"One of Kishenov's officers, a man named Louis Khemski, was a member of the Russian Revolutionary Society, whose existence only became known five years ago. After the capture of the *Ithuriel* the heads of this society met, and to them this man communicated the secret of Mount Terror. Kishenov and the other officer refused to join the revolutionists, and were assassinated.

"Khemski was at once taken on board the *Ithuriel*, now renamed the *Revenge*, and guided her to the fissure leading into Mount Terror. Its outer portion was of course filled and covered with ice and snow, but as soon as Khemski had found its position by his landmarks, a couple of shells speedily re-opened it, and it was here that the *Revenge* lay hidden while you were ransacking the world for her.

"Olga inherited from her grandfather, the father of the Vladimir Romanoff who was executed for disobeying the order of the Council, all the plans and directions necessary for the building both of air-ships and submarine vessels, and as soon as this perfect stronghold and hiding-place was discovered, her accomplices in the conspiracy for the restoration of the Russian monarchy at once devoted their fortunes to the supply of money and materials. The *Revenge* made one more voyage to Russia, and by travelling at full speed at a great elevation managed to make it unobserved.

"The services of the cleverest engineers and most skilful craftsmen among the revolutionists were secured. Transports were chartered and sent out to Antarctica loaded with materials. On the shores of the subterranean lake the first squadron of submarine vessels was built, and then began the system of ocean terrorism which soon paralysed the trade of the world.

"Piracy was carried on with utter ruthlessness. Transports were sunk by the vessels, and then plundered by divers of the treasure which they carried, and which was employed to purchase new materials and to repay those who had furnished the first funds.

"Alexis and myself were kept by Olga, as I said in my first letter, under the influence of a drug which completely paralysed our volitional power, and were compelled to reveal all we knew concerning our own air-ships, submarine vessels, guns, and explosives. And in this manner was created and equipped the force which will be employed to dispute with us the empire of the world unless we are able to extirpate it utterly."

While the despatch to the Council was being drawn up,

the *Narwhal* had been lying in the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, renewing her store of motive power from the generating station ashore. As soon as the engineer in charge reported that her power-reservoirs were full, and Alan had delivered the despatch for conveyance to Aeria by air-ship, Alexis, who had been apparently buried in a brown study for the last two hours or so, asked Alan to come with him into his private cabin, and as soon as the two friends were alone together he said to him—

"Look here, old man! While you fellows have been drawing up that despatch, and talking about the impossibility of attacking the stronghold at Mount Terror, I've been doing some thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that as far as an under-sea attack is concerned, it isn't quite so hopeless as you've made out."

"I shall be only too delighted to hear you prove us wrong," replied Alan, his eyes brightening at the prospect, for he knew Alexis too well not to be sure that he would not have spoken in this way unless he had pretty solid reasons for doing so. "Say on, my friend; I am all attention."

"Get out to sea, then, as fast as ever you can," said Alexis, "for there's not an hour to be lost if you adopt my plan, and if you don't we can just come back."

"Very well," said Alan. "What's the course?"

"Clear the islands and head away southward as hard as you can go," replied Alexis briefly.

The excitement of the battle in which he had played such a terrible part had left Alan in just the frame of mind to listen to the project of a desperate adventure, such as he instinctively knew was now in his friend's mind. Without hesitating further he went into the saloon, summoned the crew of the *Narwhal*, and said to them—

"Alexis and I have decided upon an enterprise which will end either in very great injury to our enemies or our own destruction. You have seen enough to-day to know that in the warfare we are engaged in there are only two choices: victory or destruction. We don't want to take anyone against

his will to what may be certain death. Those who care to go ashore may do so."

Not a man moved. An athletic sailor named George Cosmo, who held the post of chief engineer, saluted, and said briefly—

"We shall all go, sir. What are the orders?"

"Get out of the harbour as fast as you can, and as soon as you are clear of the islands sink two fathoms, steer a straight course due south-east, and put her through the water as hard as she'll go," replied Alan.

Cosmo saluted again, and left the room with his comrades to execute the order.

"Now, my friend," said Alan, turning to Alexis as soon as they were alone again, "what is your plan?"

"Simply this," replied Alexis. "Mount Terror, or at any rate the mouth of the submarine tunnel, is in round numbers three thousand geographical miles from here. Our speed is thirty miles an hour faster than that of Olga's squadron. That means that even if they go back at once and at full speed we shall be there four or five hours before them.

"They, I think, have had quite enough fighting for to-day, and I don't believe they'll attack the island again—first, because they know that they can't take our sea defences by surprise, and, second, because they think the *Narwhal* will remain on guard.

"Either they will go off on a raiding expedition somewhere else with the air-ships—in which case we can't follow them, for we don't know where they're going—or they will return to Mount Terror at an easy speed of fifty or sixty miles an hour. They will never dream that you and I will venture to attack the stronghold single-handed, and, therefore, that is just what I propose to do."

"That will be odds of about forty to one against the *Narwhal*," replied Allan, somewhat gravely. "Unless we can destroy it completely before they get back. But go on. Let's hear the rest. I don't think you can propose anything too desperate for me now that I have really tasted the blood of the enemy."

"Well, what I propose is not to destroy the stronghold, simply because it would be impossible to do that by sea. I merely propose to get quietly into the tunnel, go to that narrow part about two miles from the entrance, fix a dozen torpedoes with time-fuses up against the roof of the tunnel, and then clear out into the open water.

"When those twelve torpedoes go off if they don't bring a few thousand tons of rock down into the tunnel and block it pretty securely I'll grant I know very little about explosives."

"Good so far, very good!" said Alan. "I confess I envy you that idea. What next?"

"Well, after that," replied Alexis. "You see we shall have shut in the vessels that are inside and shut out those that are outside. The ones inside will be no use for some time, for it will take the divers a good many days to open the tunnel again, even if they ever do.

"As for those outside, we can lie in wait for them if they return, and trust to the *Narwhal's* speed and strength to sink as many of them as we can, or else, if they don't put in an appearance, we can come home with the consciousness that we have done about all the damage in our power. Now, what do you think?"

Alan was silent for a few moments, weighing the pros and cons of the desperate venture—for desperate it was, in spite of the incomparable speed and strength of the splendid vessel he commanded.

It was easy enough, always supposing that it could be accomplished without interruption; but to be caught in the tunnel, as was quite possible, between a force inside and one outside meant almost certain destruction, for if the *Narwhal* was not rammed and sunk in a space too narrow for her to turn she would be certain to be blown up by the torpedoes which would be launched against her.

In the end, the very character of the desperate venture, combined with the magnitude of the injury it would do to the enemy, overcame the scruples of his prudence. He put his

hand on Alexis' shoulder, and giving him a gentle shake, said with a laugh—

"Bravo, old philosopher! You've done more with your thinking than we have with our talking and writing. We'll do it, if there isn't a square foot of the *Narwhal* left when the business is over."

"I knew you'd say that," said Alexis. "Now let's have some dinner and go to sleep, for we shall want it."

It was then very nearly midday, and the *Narwhal* had cleared the islands, and, with her prow pointed direct for the north-eastern extremity of Wilkes's Land, was rushing at full speed through the water about twelve feet below the surface of the sea. For twenty hours she sped silently and swiftly and unseen on her way, swept round the ice-barrier that fences the northern promontory of Victoria Land and into the bay dominated by the fiery crest of Mount Erebus.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM THE SEA TO THE AIR.

WENTY-FOUR hours after she had reached Mount Terror the *Narwhal* came into the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, running easily along the surface, with the red flag flying at her flag-staff. The news spread rapidly through the little settlement, the dwellers in which had been wondering greatly at her sudden disappearance, and there was quite a crowd on the jetty as she ran alongside. Max Ernstein was among it, and as the battleship came to a standstill he saw to his amazement Alan spring ashore and come towards him with outstretched hands.

"Why, what does this mean?" he said, as he grasped his hand. "I thought you told me you were never going to leave the *Narwhal* until"—

"Until we had done what we have done," said Alan with a laugh, as he returned his hand-clasp with a grip that made the bones crack. "We have destroyed a good half of what remained of the Russian sea navy, and, what's more, we've blown up the entrance to their submarine dockyard, and completely crippled them as far as building or equipping new vessels is concerned until they can find a new harbour."

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Ernstein. "Glorious! You'll be wearing the golden wings again in forty-eight hours."

"If I am," said Alan, flushing with pleasure at the thought, "the credit will be due to Alexis, and not to me. It was his

idea entirely. But never mind that now. We've suffered rather badly, and only just escaped with our lives. Five out of six of the *Narwhal's* crew are disabled, and I want you to get them out and send them away to Aeria as soon as possible. Meanwhile Alexis and I will write our despatch to the Council."

His instructions were obeyed at once, and the invalids were transferred to the *Vega*, the air-ship that was to convey them to Aeria, and in her luxurious state-rooms their hurts were attended to by the best skill on the island while the despatch was being drawn up.

It was brief, plain, almost formal in language, and confined entirely to statement of bare fact, and in little more than an hour after the arrival of the *Narwhal* at Christmas Harbour the *Vega* had risen into the air, and was speeding on her way towards Aeria.

Meanwhile the news of the daring venture and brilliant exploits of Alan and Alexis and their comrades spread like wildfire through the island, and everyone who was not engaged on duties that could not be left came to the settlement to see and congratulate the two heroes of the hour, whose strange and romantic fate, so well known to every Aerian, had thus suddenly been glorified by the triumph of the genius and daring which had proved capable of wresting victory from defeat and glory from misfortune.

Although some were more demonstrative, none were heartier or more sincere in their congratulations than Edward Forrest, the admiral of the station, and, unknown to Alan and Alexis, he and Ernstein had sent a joint despatch by the *Vega*, strongly urging both the justice and the policy of at once restoring to the full rights of citizenship the two men who had proved themselves possessed of such extraordinary ability.

If the battle for the empire of the world was to be fought over again, the command of the forces of Aeria could not be entrusted to any hands so able and so daring as those of the President's son and his friend and companion in misfortune and victory. The triumphs at Kerguelen and Antarctica had really been due to them alone. They had given warning of

the attack on the station, and it was due to the skill and boldness of their strategy that it had been foiled with such disaster to the enemy.

This of itself was much, but it had not satisfied either their ambition or their devotion, for, after it had been accomplished, they had carried the war almost single-handed in the Russian stronghold, and there, under circumstances of unparalleled danger to themselves, they had struck a blow which could not fail to cripple the sea-power of the enemy, and so influence to an incalculable extent the ultimate issue of the war which, ere long, might be raging over the whole world.

That night, while the almost constant storms of the southern winter were sweeping over the barren surface of Desolation Land, a feast was held in the central hall of the headquarters at Christmas Harbour in honour of the double victory and the return of the two chief heroes of it from their long captivity. The next day was spent in a rigorous inspection of all the defences of the island and the machinery and ammunition of the air-ships and submarine vessels. At six o'clock in the evening, twenty-six hours after she had started, the *Vega* returned from Aeria, bringing the reply of the Council to the despatches which she had taken.

The Council has heard with great satisfaction of the repulse of the attack on the station at Kerguelen and of the distinguished services rendered by Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov, both at Kerguelen and Mount Terror.

In recognition of the great skill and devotion they have displayed, the Council invites them to assume the command of the air-ship *Ithuriel*, and to make use of that vessel to execute such plans and purposes as in their discretion will best serve the interests of the State of Aeria for a period of one year from the present date. They will be supplied with motive power and all stores and materials of war at any of the oceanic stations.

The Council accepts the recommendation contained in the supplement to the first despatch, and has given orders for the immediate building of a hundred air-ships of the *Ithuriel* class and the same number of submarine battleships of the *Narwhal* type. These are expected to be ready for service at the end of the year, by which time the Council hopes to be able to call upon Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov to assume the duties of admiral and vice-admiral of the aerial navies, and at the same time to restore to them full privileges of citizenship in Aeria.

The admiral and officers of Kerguelen will give all assistance in the carrying out of these directions, and will make and transmit all necessary reports in

connection with them. No further hostilities are to be undertaken for the present by the aerial or sea forces, but they will maintain a strict watch against all possible surprises on the part of the enemy, and be ready to repel any assault which may be made. This order does not apply to the air-ship *Ithuriel*.

Given in the Council Hall of Aeria on the Eleventh day of May in the hundred and thirty-second year of the Deliverance.

ALAN ARNOLD, President.
FRANCIS TREMAYNE, Vice-President

To Edward Forrest,
Admiral in Command at the Station of Kerguelen.

Such was the reply of the Council to the news of the daring foray made by the *Narwhal* upon the stronghold of Mount Terror, and the suggestions of Admiral Forrest and Captain Ernstein. Although it did not precisely adopt the latter, which, indeed, the Council was well justified in looking upon as inspired rather by enthusiasm than the judicial spirit proper to the occasion, it was even more satisfactory both to Alan and Alexis than an immediate recall would have been.

True, they had done great and brilliant service in the first few days of their return to freedom. They had virtually crippled the Russian sea-power by the blows which they had so skilfully, so swiftly, and so daringly struck, but neither of them felt that this was a sufficient achievement to warrant their full restoration to all that they had lost through the fatal error that they had made on board the old *Ithuriel*.

Both, indeed, longed ardently for just such further opportunity of devoting themselves to the service of their race and country as this order offered them. In command of the new *Ithuriel*, one of the swiftest and most formidable aerial warships in existence, there was no telling the damage that they might do to the enemy or what service they might render to their friends.

They knew that, as regarded the Russian force, the odds against them were about twenty-four to one, and they also knew that Olga and her lieutenants would lose no time in increasing their navy to the utmost extent in their power in preparation for the war of extermination that was now inevitable.

They had a year before them during which they would have

an absolutely free hand, and all the supplies that the resources of Aeria could give them. True, it was a year of exile and probation, but they gladly welcomed the test of fidelity and devotion which it offered, and which, worthily passed through, would mean restoration of all they had lost, and a return to their friends and kindred in their beloved valley of Aeria armed with powers and responsibilities which would make them practically the arbiters of the destinies of their people, and perhaps of the whole human race.

But the *Vega* had brought something more to the two friends and exiles than the reply of the Council to their despatches, for immediately he landed her captain handed to Alan a small sealed packet addressed to him in the handwriting of his sister Isma. When he opened it, as he did at the first opportunity that found him alone, he found that it contained two letters and two chromatic photographs.

The letters were from his parents and sister. His father's was, as may well be imagined, very different from the cold and formal despatch that he had signed as President of the Council. It was full of tender and loving sympathy for him in the strange fate that had overtaken him, and, while it entirely absolved them of all moral blame for the loss of the flagship and the lives of his companions, it exhorted him earnestly to apply himself without useless regrets to the work of the year of probation which the Council had seen fit to impose upon him, and it ended with an assurance that the happiest day that had been known in Aeria within the memory of its citizens would be that on which the golden wings would be replaced on their foreheads in the Council Hall of the city.

To this letter was added another, written by Alan's mother, and written as only a mother can write to her son. Strong and well tried as he was, there were tears in Alan's eyes when he had finished reading these two letters, but they did not remain there long after he had begun the one from his sister.

Isma, proud beyond measure of the exploits of her brother and the man she still looked upon as her lover, and absolutely assured that when the time came both would return covered

with honour, wrote in the highest spirits. As it was an invariable rule of life among the Aerians to be perfectly frank with one another, and to take every precaution to avoid those misunderstandings which in a less perfect state of society had produced so much personal and social suffering, she told him in plain yet tender language exactly what had passed between her and Alma on the night that his first letter had been received.

Yet she said nothing that in any way committed either Alma or himself to a renewal of the troth which had been broken by the designs of Olga Romanoff, and though she sent her remembrances to Alexis, she sent them as though to a friend, tacitly giving both to understand that no words of love must pass between the two exiles and their former sweethearts until they met again upon equal terms.

But there was another message not contained in the letter, or written in any words, which said more than all that she had written, and this was conveyed by the photographs, which she sent without a word of allusion to them. As Alan looked upon them the six years of mental slavery and degrading servitude to the daughter of the enemies of his race passed away for the moment, and he saw himself standing with Alma in one of the groves of Aeria plighting his boyish troth on the night before he started on his fatal voyage in the *Ithuriel*.

The face that looked at him with such marvellous lifelikeness, with all its perfection of form and exquisite colouring, reproduced with the most absolute fidelity, was the same face that had been upturned to his to receive his kisses on that never-to-be-forgotten night. And yet, in another sense, it was not the same.

That had been the sunny, smiling face of a girl to whom sorrow and evil were as absolutely unknown as they would be to an angel in heaven, but this was the face of a woman who had lived and thought and suffered.

And when he remembered that whatever of sorrow or suffering she had known had been on his account, the last lingering traces of the vile spells of the evilly beautiful Syren of the

Skies, who had so fatally bewitched him, vanished from his soul, and the old love revived within him pure and strong, and intensified tenfold by the knowledge of the great reparation that he owed to the girl upon whose life he had brought the only shadow it had ever known.

He knew that their hands would never meet again until all that had been lost was regained, at whatever cost of labour or devotion that might be necessary on his part, but he also knew that in all these years no other man had been found worthy to fill the place that he had once occupied, and which he was resolved to win back or die in the attempt, and this knowledge made him look forward to the mighty struggle which lay before him with an eagerness that augured well for its issue.

He had gone into his own cabin on board the *Ithuriel*, which was being rapidly prepared for her roving commission, to read his letters in solitude. He put Alma's photograph on the table, and sat before it with his eyes fixed upon it until every line of form and tint of colour was indelibly impressed anew upon his memory.

Then he kissed it as reverently as a devotee of old might have kissed a sacred relic, and then he attached the oval miniature to a chain of alternate links of azuriné and gold, and hung it round his neck inside his tunic, registering a mental vow that if death came before he once more wore the golden wings, it should find it lying nearest his heart.

"This," he said, speaking to himself, as he took Isma's photograph up from the table, and looked fondly upon the radiantly lovely face that looked out from its frame, "is evidently not intended for me. Isma doesn't say who it's for, but I fancy that there is some one on board the *Ithuriel* who has a very much better right to it than I have. I wonder if Alexis is in his room?"

So saying, he left his cabin and found his friend still deep in the perusal of two lengthy letters from his father and mother.

"So you have had letters from home as well, old man? I

hope they've been as pleasant reading as mine have," he said, going to the couch on which Alexis was sitting, and holding one hand behind his back.

"Yes, they're from my father and mother, and so they can scarcely be anything else, so far as what they do say. It's what they don't say that gives me the only cause to find fault with them. But still that, I suppose, would be expecting too much under the circumstances."

He ended with something very like a sigh, and Alan replied as gravely as he could—

"And what might that be, my knight of the rueful countenance? Don't you think the Council have treated us splendidly, and given us a glorious opportunity of winning back all that the daughter of the Tsar has robbed us of?"

"Of course, I do," replied Alexis, looking up at him with a flush on his cheeks. "But for all that there is one thing still, something that I am not ashamed to say I value above everything else that I have lost or can regain."

"And that is—?"

"Well, to put it plainly," replied Alexis, the flush deepening as he spoke, "these two letters don't contain one single word about Isma. Now you know what I mean. Of course, I am ready to do everything that the Council may call upon us to do, and the moment that I know I have won back the right to wear the golden wings will be the proudest of my life, but it will be far from the happiest if I only go back to Aeria to find Isma another man's wife, and what else can I think when they don't so much as mention her name?"

"Be of good cheer, my friend," replied Alan with a laugh, putting one hand on his shoulder, and taking the other from behind his back. "You will never find that, I can promise you. I am the bringer of good tidings. There, take those and feast your eyes and your heart on them in solitude as I have just been doing on something else."

So saying he put Isma's letter and photograph into Alexis' hand, and without another word left him to gather courage and comfort from them as he had himself done.

CHAPTER XV.

OLGA IN COUNCIL.

HE remains of the Russian submarine squadron, numbering now only seventeen vessels, headed out northward into the open sea, after leaving their disabled consorts to their fate. In the brief space occupied by her first rush they had recognised the *Narwhal* both by her size and speed, and one of the captains avowed that he had recognised Alan Arnold, Olga's late captive, standing under the glass dome of the conning-tower, steering the great vessel upon her devastating course.

Twenty miles out from the island they rose to the surface and made out the aerial fleet some five miles to the southward, hovering at an elevation of about a thousand feet, and evidently on the look-out for them. Michael Lossenski, who had escaped the ram of the *Narwhal*, ran up his flagstaff, and flew a signal which soon brought the air-ships bearing down upon them. The *Revenge* sank down to the surface of the water, and took Lossenski off his ship in order that he might report himself.

Olga and his father received the first news of the defeat of their naval forces with cold displeasure; but when Michael told them that more than half the fleet had been destroyed by the *Narwhal*, and that it was believed that Alan was in command of her, Olga's anger blazed out into fury, and she cried passionately—

"You fools and cowards to have fled like that from one ship and one man! Could not seventeen of you have overcome

that one vessel? Had you no rams, no torpedoes, that you fled before this single foe?"

He took the bitter rebuke in silence. He knew that he had failed both in duty and courage, and that a reply would only make matters worse. Olga looked at him for a moment, with eyes burning with scorn and anger. Then she rose from her seat, and, pointing to the door of the saloon, said—

"Go! You have disgraced yourself and us. Take your ships back to Mount Terror, and await our further commands."

With bowed head and face flushed with shame, the disgraced man walked in silence out of the saloon and left Olga alone with his father. As soon as he had gone Olga began striding up and down the saloon, her hands clenched and her eyes, black with passion, glittering fiercely under her straight-drawn brows.

Orloff Lossenski knew her too well not to let her anger take its course uninterrupted, so he sat and watched her, and waited for her to speak first. At last she stopped in front of him, and said in a low fierce voice, that was almost hoarse with the strength of her passion—

"So! you were right, my friend. I was a fool, an idiot, to let those two escape. I ought to have killed them, as you advised. They were of no further use to us, and we could have done without them. Yes, truly I was a fool, such a fool as love makes of every woman!"

"Not of every woman, Majesty," replied Lossenski in a low soothing tone, that was not without a trace of irony. "If I may say it without disrespect, your ancestress, the great Catherine, knew how to combine love and wisdom. When she wearied of a lover, or had no further use for a man, she never left him the power of revenging his dismissal."

"Yes, yes," she replied. "I know that; but I did not weary of this man, this king among men, for whose love I would have sold my soul. I only wearied of my own attempts to win it. You know what I mean, Lossenski, and you can understand me, for you have confessed that he was well worthy of the sacrifice.

"You know that when he seemed my lover he was only my

slave—that I could not compel the man to love me, but only the passive machine that I had made of him, and you know, too, that the moment I had let him regain his freedom of will he would have loathed and cursed me, as no doubt he is doing now.

"Why did I not kill him? How could I, when I loved him better than my own life, and all my dreams of empire? Why, I could not even kill the other one because he was Alan's friend, and because he would have hated me still more for doing so.

"But, after all," she continued, speaking somewhat more calmly, "it is not setting them free that has done the mischief. It is the treason or the miracle that enabled them to capture the *Narwhal*. I would give a good deal to know how that was done. They cannot have done it themselves, for I had given them enough of the drug to deprive them of all will-power for at least twenty-four hours, and I told that traitor, Turgenieff, who must have betrayed the attack on Kerguelen, to give them more when he landed them on the island."

"But is your Majesty sure that they took the drug?" said Lossenski, interrupting her for the first time. "Did you give it with your own hand, or see them take it with your own eyes?"

"No!" said Olga, with a start. "I did not. I sent it to them by my maid, Anna, but she swore that she put it in their wine, and when they had finished their last meal the decanter was empty."

"That was a grave mistake, Majesty," said Lossenski, in a tone of respectful reproof, "and one which may yet cost you the empire of the world. It is such trifles as that which destroy the grandest schemes."

"I know! I know!" said Olga impatiently. "You may think me a fool and a weakling, but I could not bring myself to see or speak to Alan again after I had at last resolved to give up the hopeless task of winning him, and send him away.

"But for that mistake the *Narwhal* would still have been ours, and we should have taken Kerguelen unawares. He could have told his people nothing else that would have harmed us, for the more he tells them about Mount Terror the more impossible they will see any attack upon it to be. No, no, it was

all that one fatal mistake! But there, it tortures me to talk about it! Tell me, my old friend and counsellor, what we are to do to repair the damage?"

Exhausted by her fierce and sudden outburst of passion, and the bitterness of her regret, Olga threw herself into a chair and sat waiting for Lossenski to speak. He remained silent for several moments, buried in thought, and then he began speaking in the low, deliberate tone of a man who has weighty counsels to impart.

"We cannot deny, Majesty, that we have been worsted in our two first encounters with these Aerians, but we must learn wisdom and patience from defeat. It seems plain to me that the Aerians are too strong for us as we are.

"When we attacked them we forgot that, while we are children in warfare, they are perfect masters of it. They have preserved the traditions of their fathers, and for four generations they have been trained in the use of the weapons which we have only just learnt to use. Therefore my advice is that we do not attack them again for the present."

"But," interrupted Olga, "in any case, they will attack us, and we shall still have to fight."

"Not of necessity, your Highness," replied Lossenski. "You see they have not pursued us, and the reason for this is that they know that both our air-ships and our submarine vessels are swifter and more powerful than theirs, with two or three exceptions.

"They will not attack us till they can do so on equal terms, and we must take care that they never do that. You have plenty of treasure and plenty of men at your command. Let us retire to our stronghold again and devote ourselves to increasing our strength both by sea and in the air, until we have made ourselves invulnerable.

"And remember, too, Majesty," he continued with an added meaning in his tone, "Aeria is not the world. There are vast possibilities before you in other directions. I am convinced now that we have made a mistake in attacking the Aerians first. Russia is ripe for revolt, and great quantities of arms

have already been manufactured. The tribes of Western Asia need only a leader to take the field, and the Sultan Khalid could put an army millions strong into the field within a few months.

"On the other hand, Anglo-Saxondom is a babel of conflicting opinions, and the mob rules throughout its length and breadth. Where everyone is master there can be no leaders, and those who are without leaders are the natural prey of the strong hand.

"They are wealthy and weak, and divided among themselves. The Aerians have given them over to their own devices. Why should you not, when we have repaired the damage we have suffered, take your aerial squadron to Moscow, proclaim the new revolution, and crown yourself Tsarina in the Kremlin?"

In speaking thus Orloff Lossenski was really only putting into formal shape the project which it had all along been the aim of Olga and her adherents to carry out. There was nothing new in the suggestion save the proposition that the revolution should be proclaimed in Russia, and that Olga should crown herself Tsarina before, instead of after, the attempted subjugation of Aeria.

Up to the present it had been believed that nothing could possibly be done until the power of the Aerians was either crushed or crippled, but the battle of Kerguelen had clearly shown that this was a task far beyond their present resources. Even the mastery of the sea was now no longer theirs, thanks to the two fatal mistakes which Olga had made, first in setting Alan and Alexis free, and second in sending them away from Mount Terror in the swiftest and most powerful vessel in their sea-navy.

Why she had been guilty of this last imprudence she could not even explain to herself. It was one of those mistakes, made in pure thoughtlessness, which again and again have marred the greatest schemes of conquest. Another vessel would have done just as well, save that she would not have performed the errand quite so quickly; but the *Narwhal* happened to be in readiness at the moment, and as Peter Turgenieff, her com-

mander, was one of Olga's most trusted sea-captains, she had given him the order to convey Alan and Alexis to the island, and so the fatal error had been committed.

It must, however, be remembered that when she made it, it was impossible for her to foresee its disastrous outcome. She implicitly believed that the two Aerians were completely under the influence of the will-poison, and so utterly unable to think or act independently, or to form and execute the daring design which they had so successfully accomplished.

But now that the mistake had been made, Orloff Lossenski saw that the course he suggested to his mistress offered the only hope of counteracting it. His advice pointed out the shortest road to the attainment of the designs of Olga and her followers; and he gave it in all sincerity, for he was absolutely devoted to Olga's person and fortune, and the realisation of her ambition was the dearest dream of his own life.

It meant, too, the restoration of his own order to all its ancient rights and privileges with the added wealth and dignity that would be won by conquest. It meant the establishment of a Russian empire far greater and more powerful than that of the last of the Tsars, for its power would extend from the Pacific coast of Asia to the Atlantic coast of Europe.

Olga heard him with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, and, when he had done speaking, she rose to her feet again and faced him, looking every inch a queen, in the ripe beauty of her perfect womanhood, and said, in tones from which every trace of her former anger and sorrow had vanished—

"Well spoken, Orloff Lossenski! That is worthy counsel for you to give and for me to hear. I will follow it, for it is wise as well as bold, and the day that I crown myself in the Kremlin you shall be the first noble in Russia. But, stop—what of the Sultan? Surely he and his armies will have to be reckoned with?"

"True," said Lossenski. "But if he will not listen to reason, cannot your air-ships destroy his armies like swarms of locusts, lay his cities in ruins, and sweep him and his dynasty from the face of the earth?"

"Yes, that is true again," replied Olga. "Provided that the Aerians did not come to his aid."

"They would not do that, I think," he replied.

"But to make that impossible why should you not make an alliance with him and offer to help him with your air-ships and submarine navy to the conquest of the world, on the condition of the restoration of the Russian Empire and the division of the world between you? Remember that as long as you kept the command of your navies of the air and the sea you could always keep him to the terms when once made."

As the old man ceased speaking Olga laid her hand upon his shoulder, and said in a low, clear, steady voice that spoke of a great resolution finally taken—

"My friend, you are the wisest of counsellors, and when I regain my throne you shall be the first Minister of the Empire. I will pardon your son for his failure to-day for the sake of his father's wisdom, and we will say no more about disaster and defeat. We will look forward only to victory and the empire that it will bring us!"

But when the defeated squadrons arrived at Mount Terror Olga was rudely awakened from her dreams of empire by the tidings of the disaster that had occurred during her absence.

The damage inflicted by the *Narwhal* was speedily proved to be irreparable. For a distance of nearly a mile the roof of the tunnel had sunk bodily down, blocking it for ever. Millions of tons of rock and earth had fallen into the submarine channel, and all hope of clearing it again was out of the question.

The explosion of the twelve torpedoes had not only brought down all the rocks in their vicinity, but it had so shaken the earth in both directions that a general subsidence had taken place, forming a barrier which was so vast and massive that its removal, even if possible, would have taken many months of labour; and so there was no avoiding the dismal conclusion that their submarine dockyard was useless, and, for the present at least, their sea-power crippled.

The effects of the explosion in the interior of the mountain,

though bad enough, were much less serious. Nearly seventy men, or more than half the total garrison that had been left behind, had been either killed or maimed for life. The six submarine warships that had been lying in the lake were, of course, useless now that their way to the sea was barred, and five of the twelve air-ships which had been lying in the vast cavern whose floor formed the shores of the subterranean lake were so seriously injured that considerable repairs would be necessary for them.

The whole of the lower level of the vast system of chambers and galleries which pierced the interior of the mountain in all directions had been flooded by the volumes of water projected from the lake by the explosion. Workshops, laboratories, and building-slips had been wrecked or thrown into complete confusion, and the appearance of the whole of the level was that of a place which had been swept by a tornado.

As soon as the amount of the damage done had been estimated, Olga called a council of war, composed of twelve of her most skilled and trusted adherents, in a chamber which was led up to by a path sloping steeply up from the shores of the lake. This chamber was an almost perfect oval, about sixty feet long by twenty wide, and about thirty high.

Neither its temperature nor its internal appointments would have given any idea of the fact that it was situated at the uttermost end of the earth, and buried under the eternal snows of Antarctica. The rough rock walls had been smoothed and hung with silken hangings, against which statues of the purest marble gleamed white, and pictures, some of vast size and exquisite execution, brought the scenes of sunnier lands to the eyes of the occupants.

Electric light-globes hung in festoons all around, shedding a mild diffused lustre over the luxurious furniture of the chamber. The floor of lava, smoothed and polished, was covered with priceless carpets into whose thick pile the foot sank noiseless, as though into soft, shallow snow.

Treasures, both of art and luxury, which had been plundered from ocean transports that had fallen victims to the rams

of the submarine cruisers were scattered about in lavish profusion that was almost barbaric in its excess. Behind the hangings of the walls ran an elaborate system of pipes which circulated fresh air drawn from the exterior of the mountain, and, heated by passing through electric furnaces, at once warmed and ventilated this council-chamber of the extraordinary woman who, in virtue of her strange conquest of the air, had come to be known among her followers as the Syren of the Skies.

Human art and science had completely conquered both the ruggedness of Nature and the inclemency of the elements, and had transformed these gloomy caverns, excavated by the volcanic fires of former ages out of the heart of Mount Terror, into warm, well-lighted, and airy abodes, capable of sheltering several hundred human beings from the rigours even of the Antarctic winter.

This subterranean retreat and stronghold was roughly divided into two levels, on the lower of which were situated the chambers and galleries which served for the performance of all the work necessary for the building of the air-ships and submarine vessels, while the upper was devoted to store-rooms and dwelling-places for the followers and assistants of the Queen of this strange realm.

No other region could have presented such a marvellous contrast to the sunlit and flower-scented paradise which was the home of their mortal enemies, the race with which they had dared to dispute the empire of the world. The powers of darkness and of light could hardly have been better typified than were these two contending forces by the different characters of their respective strongholds.

When the Council of War, summoned at Olga's bidding by Orloff Lossenski, had assembled in the Central Chamber, a pair of heavy purple velvet curtains parted, and the Syren entered from the gallery, which had been hewn through the solid rock and which communicated with her private suite of apartments. The members of the Council rose as she entered and greeted her as subjects were wont to greet their sovereigns in the days before the Terror.

She acknowledged their reverence with a royal condescension, and took her seat on a raised divan at the inner end of the chamber. Beckoning Lossenski to her side, she exchanged a few words with him in an undertone, and then called upon Andrei Levin, the Secretary of the Council, to enumerate the nature and extent of the losses they had sustained in their brief but disastrous first attempt to cope with the mighty race which had dominated the world for nearly a century and a half.

When Levin had finished, it was found that, in addition to the irreparable damage done to the submarine dockyard, no less than thirty-five submarine cruisers had been destroyed or rendered useless, while twenty-three air-ships had been annihilated by the projectiles of the Aerians. This left an available fighting force of twenty-eight submarine and twenty-four aerial warships fit for service.

It had been calculated that it would take at least a month of hard work to get the subterranean arsenal into such working order as would enable them to repair their losses, and after this at least twelve months would have to elapse before they had brought their fighting force up to the strength it had possessed but five short days before.

In addition to their losses in ships and war materials, more than a hundred of Olga's chosen and most devoted followers had lost their lives in the terrible warfare which knew no sparing of life, and it would be necessary to draft more men from Russia to replace them before the work could be carried on upon an adequate scale.

Olga listened to the catalogue of disasters with frowning brows and eyes gleaming with hardly-suppressed fury. When it was over, she rose and spoke in a voice whose wonderful music and witchery seemed to charm all sense of misfortune for the time being out of the hearts of her listeners. A born queen of men, she knew when to wither with her scorn or to charm with her sweetness, and she was well aware that this hour of defeat and disaster was no time for reproaches or rebuke.

So her voice was low and sweet, and almost pleading, as she reviewed the situation, which, for the moment, seemed so dark, and appealed to her followers, through those who commanded them, not to yield before a sudden and temporary misfortune, but to learn from defeat the lessons of victory. She reminded them of all that their ancestors and hers had lost at the hands of the Terrorists, the forefathers of the hated and arrogant Aerians, and she painted in glowing colours the glory and the boundless wealth that would be the reward of victory.

Heavy as their losses had been, there was no reason why they should not repair them. She reminded them how, five years before, they had possessed but a single air-ship, and were only a weak and scattered body of revolutionaries. Now they possessed, even after all they had lost, an aerial fleet superior to all the vessels of the Aerian navies save two, and submarine cruisers swifter and more powerful than any that floated, save only the stolen *Narvchal*. More than this, they were now supported by a vast organisation numbering thousands of devoted men and women, any one of whom would give his or her life for the cause for which they were fighting.

She only spoke for a quarter of an hour or so, but every word went home, and when she concluded with an appeal to their loyalty and devotion, the twelve members of the Council rose with one accord to their feet, and there and then spontaneously renewed the oaths of fealty to her person and dynasty which they had taken when they enlisted in her service. Every man of them was a scion of some once noble Russian house, and her cause was theirs in virtue of personal interest as well as that sentiment of blind, unreasoning loyalty which even four generations of freedom had failed to eradicate from the Russian blood.

Olga thanked them with a tremor in her voice which, whether it was real or not, spoke to them with far greater eloquence than words, and then she bade Lossenski lay before the Council the plans which she had already discussed with

him for the future conduct of the vast enterprise which had opened so inauspiciously.

Lossenski rose at once, and for over two hours unfolded a vast and subtly-conceived scheme, which has been very briefly outlined in a previous chapter, and the results of the working out of which will become apparent in due course.

At the end of the discussion which followed it was decided that a transport should be purchased as soon as possible in a Russian port and sent out to Antarctica with fresh supplies of men and materials.

A flotilla of twelve marine cruisers was told off to convoy her on her voyage, and protect her from possible attack in case the Aerians should suspect or discover the purpose to which she was devoted.

As no more submarine vessels could be built in Antarctica —for the fearful cold of the outside waters made such work totally impossible—all efforts were to be concentrated upon the increase of the aerial navy, and a hundred air-ships, in addition to those already in existence, was fixed upon as the minimum strength that it would be safe to depend upon, when the hour for the final struggle came.

No force was to be wasted, if possible, upon minor attacks or isolated engagements, for the Russians, like the Aerians, had learnt that, under the conditions of the new warfare, skirmishes only meant destruction in detail and loss of strength entirely disproportionate to the advantage gained.

Thus virtually the same decisions were arrived at in Aeria and Antarctica. Both sides resolved to husband their resources and increase their strength, and then to risk everything upon the issue of one mighty conflict, a veritable struggle of the gods, in which both equally recognised that the defeated would be annihilated and the victors would remain undisputed masters of the world.

Finally, it was decided that Orloff Lossenski should depart at once with a formal offer of alliance to the Sultan of the Moslem Empire, and that a day later Olga should follow with

a squadron of twenty air-ships and give him the alternative of alliance or immediate war.

If, as was confidently expected, he chose alliance, five submarine cruisers were to be given to him, so that he might use them as models for the construction of a fleet which should be powerful enough to sweep the Aerian warships from the seas, and which would be supplied with the secret motive power at a station to be established at Larnaka under Russian control.

Then, when all was in readiness for the world-war, Olga was to be proclaimed Tsarina in Moscow, and the standard of absolute monarchy once more reared over the re-erected throne of the House of Romanoff. Anglo-Saxondom was to be invaded and conquered, and Aeria itself attacked and either subdued or depopulated and laid waste.

CHAPTER XVI.

KHALID THE MAGNIFICENT.

A FEW minutes before midnight on the fifteenth of May, in the year 2036, Khalid the Magnificent, lord and master of the greatest and most splendid realm that had ever been ruled over by a single man since the world began, stood alone on the spacious terrace of his palace in Alexandria, gazing up at the myriads of stars that shone in the cloudless firmament above him, and dreaming one of those dreams of world-wide empire which had haunted the soul of such men as he from the days of Rameses the Great until his own.

He was a man of thirty-four, tall, swarthy, and athletic, with the proud aquiline features of the Arab, the dark, alternately flashing and melting eyes of the Circassian, and the strong, reposeful dignity of the Turk—a man whom women looked upon with love and men with respect that was often akin to dread.

The lord of seven hundred million subjects who, even in those days, so strong was still the faith and loyalty of the Moslem, looked upon him only as something less than Allah and the Prophet whose sacred blood flowed in his veins, his soaring ambition was not content even with the splendid inheritance that he had received from his ancestors.

In his being were closely blended those elements of religious enthusiasm and worldly ambition which had made the men of the Golden Age of Islam such irresistible conquerors and such

mighty rulers of men. He had pondered over the past history of his faith and his people from the times of the Prophet down to his own, until he had come to believe himself the man chosen by Destiny to subjugate the world, and to compel all men, from pole to pole, and east to west, to accept the rule and faith of Islam, and to confess the unity of God and the apostleship of Mohammed.

He saw in the vast area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, which now, in name at least, dominated Europe, America, and Australasia, only a collection of democratic and ill-governed States in which the mob ruled by blind counting of heads, and in which religion had been refined into a mere philosophy of life and morals, the last word of which seemed to him to be: Make the best of to-day, lest to-morrow should never come.

In his own breast the flame of the fierce, uncompromising faith of Islam burnt, undimmed by the mists of the centuries that had passed since the first Moslem armies had emerged from the deserts of Arabia to conquer the greater part of the Roman world.

Why should he not send forth his armies, as the Khalifs of old had done, to plant the banner of the Crescent over the subjugated realms of Christendom, and rule, the greatest of the Commanders of the Faithful, sovereign lord of a Moslem world?

It was a splendid destiny, but there was a power in the world, located in one tiny spot of earth, and yet, so far as he knew, universal and irresistible, before which the armies which he had called into existence would be as helpless as a swarm of locusts before a forest fire.

This power possessed the empire of the air, and therefore of the earth. In the days of the Terror it had led the Anglo-Saxon race to the conquest of the world. Would it sit idly now behind the bulwarks of Aeria and watch his armies conquering the domains of Anglo-Saxondom?

Was it not far more likely that those terrible air-ships would be sent forth to hurl their destroying lightnings from the skies and overwhelm his armies and his cities in irretriev-

able ruin? These Aerians had ruled the world for a hundred and twenty-five years, and yet had committed no act of aggression upon the rightful liberties of any nation. How, therefore, could he believe that they would hold their mighty hand while he carried fire and sword through the habitations of their blood and kindred?

If he gave the word for war, within forty-eight hours after he had spoken more than ten millions of men, armed with weapons of fearful precision and destructive power, would stand ready to do his bidding and to carry the banner of the Crescent to the uttermost ends of the earth; but of what use would be their numbers, their valour, or their devotion with a squadron of aerial cruisers wheeling above them and hurling death and destruction upon them from the inaccessible heights of the sky?

He remembered how his ancestor Mohammed Reshad had been stopped in his career of conquest, and how his victorious armies had been decimated and thrown into confusion by a flotilla of air-ships and war-balloons which a dozen cruisers of the present Aerian navy would have swept from the skies in a few minutes. Intolerable as the thought was to his haughty soul, the truth remained that, in the midst of all his power and splendour, he was as helpless as a child before the real masters of the world. He had armies and fleets, but he could not make war without their permission or the assurance of their neutrality, save with the certainty of disaster and defeat.

What would he not give for a squadron of these aerial battleships? Half his empire, willingly, and yet he knew that even an attempt to build a single air-ship would be the signal for his own death and the end of the dominion of his dynasty.

He had no knowledge of the momentous events which had just been taking place on the other side of the world. He still believed implicitly in the unquestioned supremacy of the Aerians throughout the domain of the skies, although he was well aware that some mysterious power had successfully dis-

puted with them the command of the seas, and he remembered the stern threat of immediate war and annihilation that the President of Aeria had promulgated against any who should even help in the concealment of the air-ship that had been lost six years before, and, so far as the world at large was concerned, had never been heard of since.

Anglo-Saxondom, and therefore Christendom, lay at his mercy but for this guardian power of the air. Its millions were unarmed and its wealth unprotected. Its indolent and luxurious democracies, occupied solely with social experiments and the increase of their material magnificence, would be crushed almost without resistance by his splendidly armed and disciplined legions.

The Crescent would replace the Cross above their temples, and the world would be a Moslem planet but for this empire of the air, universal and unconquerable, which barred his way to the dominion of the world and the final triumph of his faith.

For the hundredth time he had revolved the hopeless dilemma in his mind, alternately looking upon the conquests he longed for, and on the splendid but useless forces at his command, when a huge, strange shape dropped swiftly and silently out of the sky overhead, and, as though in answer to the unspoken call of his intense longing, one of those very air-ships of which he had been thinking with such angry despair swept with a majestic downward sloping curve out of the dusk of the night, and ran up close alongside the low parapet of the terrace on which he was standing.

It was the first time he had ever seen one of these marvellous vessels, which were the talk and the wonder of the world, at such close quarters. Paralysed for the moment by mingled curiosity and amazement, he recoiled with a startled invocation to the Prophet on his lips, and then stood staring at it in silence, wondering whether the strange apparition meant the visit of a friend or an enemy.

While he was standing thus the air-ship drifted as silently as a shadow over the parapet, and sank gently down until it

rested on the marble floor of the vast terrace. Then a sliding door opened in the after-part of the glass dome which covered the deck from stem to stern, a light metal stairway fell from it, and three men richly and yet simply dressed descended to the terrace and advanced to where he stood.

Two of them halted at a respectful distance, and the third, a man whose dignity of bearing was enhanced by the snowy whiteness of his hair and beard, advanced alone, and with a grave and courteous gesture of salute said in English, the language of universal intercourse—

"Am I right in believing this to be the palace of his Majesty the Sultan?"

It was some moments before Khalid recovered his composure sufficiently to answer the question, simple as it was. His wonder was increased tenfold when he saw that his visitor from the skies did not wear the golden wings which were the insignia of the Aerians.

Was it possible that some other inhabitants of the earth had, in spite of the rigid prohibition of the Supreme Council, managed to build an aerial navy? His heart leapt with exultation at the thought. Obeying the impulse of the moment, he took a stride forward and held out his hand, saying—

"I know not who you are, or whence you come, but if you come in friendship there is my hand in welcome. This is the palace, and I am Khalid, the Commander of the Faithful. What is your errand?"

His visitor took the outstretched hand, and, bending low over it, replied in a tone of the deepest respect—

"I am honoured and fortunate beyond measure! I trust your Majesty will pardon the strangeness of my coming for the importance of the mission that brings me."

"Say on, sir, and tell me freely who you are and what your mission is, for I am all impatience to know," said the Sultan, speaking even more cordially than before.

"I am Orloff Lossenski," replied the ambassador from the skies, "and I am the bearer of a message from my mistress, Olga Romanoff, by right of descent Tsarina of the Russias,

and deprived of her lawful rights of rule by the Terrorists who reign in Aeria."

"Then you are enemies of the Aerians?" broke in the Sultan, "and you possess air-ships like that marvellous craft yonder! How have you—but pardon me, I have interrupted you. You can satisfy my curiosity later on."

"Her Majesty, my mistress, possesses a large fleet of air-ships, of which this is one," replied Lossenski, "and she has sent me as her envoy to give your Majesty this letter which will explain my mission in full. At this hour to-morrow night the Tsarina will come in person to receive your answer to it."

As he spoke he presented a letter to the Sultan, and then drew back a pace. Khalid took the missive without a word and walked towards one of the electric lamps with which the terrace was lighted, breaking the seal as he went. This is what he read—

To Khalid the Magnificent,
Sultan of the Moslems.

You have dreams of world-wide conquest, but the fear of the power of the Aerians restrains you from putting them into action. You command armies and fleets, but they are useless and helpless because you cannot fight in the air as well as on land and sea.

I can give you the power of doing this, and I will help you to the conquest of the world if you will help me to regain the dominions that were stolen from my ancestors in the days of the Terror.

Twenty-four hours after you receive this I will come for your answer to it. If you agree to the general terms I have no fear but that the details will be easily arranged between us. This is brought to you by Orloff Lossenski, my chief counsellor and responsible minister, who, at your Majesty's desire, will lay the particulars of my proposals before you in full.

OLGA ROMANOFF,
Tsarina of the Russias.

Hardly had the Sultan finished the perusal of this strangely curt and yet all-pregnant letter when a cry from Lossenski's two attendants caused him to look up. If what he had seen but a few minutes before had amazed him, what he saw now fairly stupefied him. A second air-ship, similar in size and shape to the first, but with a hull of a strangely lustrous blue

metal, had dropped without sign or sound out of space, and was hovering exactly above Lossenski's vessel with her ten long slender guns pointing in all directions.

A moment later she seemed to drop bodily on to the Russian air-ship, splintering her thin steel masts with the weight of her hull, and yet stopping in her descent before she crushed in the glass dome of the deck. The next instant a score of men slipped swiftly over the side and gained the open door of the Russians' deck-chamber. Then there came a sound of fierce cries and oaths, and the quick crackling reports of repeating pistols.

The envoy's two companions turned as though to fly, but two shots fired in quick succession brought them down before they had made a couple of strides. Then a dozen men leapt down upon the terrace and covered Lossenski and the Sultan with their pistols before they had time to recover from the stupefaction into which the suddenness of the attack had thrown them.

The next moment a man, whose splendid stature raised him a good head above the Russian and the Moslem, came down the steps from the deck of the now captured air-ship. As he advanced towards them Khalid, brave and haughty as he was, looked up at him almost as he might have looked upon the visible shape of one of the angels of his faith.

He was dressed in the Aeria costume, save for the fact that, instead of azurine and gold, his winged coronet was black and lustrous as polished jet. In his left hand he carried a magazine pistol, and in his right a long slender rapier with a blade of azurine that gleamed with an intense blue radiance in the light of the electric lamps.

"Orloff Lossenski, you are our prisoner! Go back to your ship or you will be shot where you stand. Sultan Khalid, have you received that letter in your hand from this man?"

Alan's words came quick and stern, but before they were spoken the Sultan had put a golden whistle to his lips and blown a shrill call, in instant obedience to which a stream of

armed guards issued from a door of the palace opening on to the terrace, spread out into a semi-circle, and in turn Alan and his companions were covered by a hundred rifles.

"Now, sir, whoever you are," exclaimed the Sultan, recovering at once his courage and his composure, "you are *my* prisoner! Throw down your arms, or"—

"Stop!" cried Alan, in a voice that rang clearly over the whole terrace. "Don't you see that your palace is under our guns? Fire a shot, and in an hour it shall be a heap of ruins."

Khalid had forgotten the air-ships for the moment. He glanced up at the two rows of guns, and saw in the lighted interiors of the deck-chambers men standing ready to rain death and ruin in every direction.

Lossenski, too, grasped the suddenly changed situation in an instant. He knew far better than the Sultan did what would be the effect of a discharge of that awful artillery upon the palace and the city, and more than this, he saw the hopeless ruin of his mistress's plans that would follow the death of the Sultan. He turned to him with an appealing gesture, and said—

"Your Majesty, for the sake of all you hold dear, send back your guards! I surrender to save you!" and then, with a glare of impotent hate at Alan, he turned and walked quickly towards the air-ships.

Nothing could have brought the terrible power of the Aerians home to the mind of Khalid the Magnificent more convincingly than the position in which he now stood. Absolute master of the greatest empire on earth, he stood on the terrace of his own palace, in the midst of his own capital, and with thousands of soldiers within call, as helpless as a child.

But before he could force the words of surrender from his reluctant lips an event occurred which, brave as he was, struck terror to his heart. Alan had raised his rapier to command the attention of his men at the guns, and the captain of the Sultan's guards, thinking he was going to strike his master,

rushed forward and struck at the uplifted blade with his scimitar. As the steel rang upon the azurine the Damascus blade splintered to the hilt.

With a cry half of rage and half of fear the Moslem whipped a pistol out of his sash, but before he could level it the bright blue blade descended swiftly, and when its point was within a foot of his assailant's eyes Alan dropped his own pistol and pressed a jewel in the centre of his belt-clasp. As he did so a pale blue flame leapt from the point of his sword, and the Moslem, without as much as a sigh, dropped dead on the floor of the terrace.

"Mashallah!" cried the Sultan, recoiling in ungovernable terror. "What are you, man or fiend, that you carry the lightnings in your hand?"

"A man like yourself, Sultan, and one who wishes your Majesty no evil," replied Alan. "I am Alan Arnold, the son of the President of Aeria, and therefore your friend, unless you choose to make me your enemy. I am at present in command of the cruiser *Ithuriel*, and we have followed that Russian vessel for over five thousand miles to find out what his errand was. When he landed on your palace we guessed it, I think, pretty nearly. Lossenski came to propose an alliance between your Majesty and his mistress, Olga Romanoff, did he not?"

Before he replied the Sultan, seeing some of his guards advancing again, and being now convinced that resistance was both unnecessary and impossible, ordered them to take away the body of their comrade and those of the two Russians who had been shot. Then he turned to Alan, and said with politeness that was perhaps more Oriental than sincere—

"Pardon my ignorance, Prince of the Air! I did not know that I was speaking to the son of one who is above all the kings of the earth. That slave deserved his death for raising his arm against your Highness. Yes, you are right. The Russian came to me with such a proposal from her you name. Here is her letter. She styles herself Tsarina of the Russias, but I have never heard her name before. Who is she?"

"I will tell your Majesty," said Alan, taking the letter which the Sultan now held out to him without hesitation, "for no one can tell you better than I can. She is the last living child of the House of Romanoff. She is beautiful beyond description, and evil beyond comprehension. She aspires to rule in fact as what she styles herself in name, and to bring back the gloom of despotism and oppression on the earth.

"She and her accomplices are responsible for that terrorism of the seas which has paralysed international commerce for more than five years, and they are also in possession of a fleet of about thirty air-ships. How they were enabled to construct them there is now no time to explain. Suffice it to say that they have them, that they have dared to challenge the forces of Aeria to a contest for the empire of the world, and that during the fortnight they have been fighting they have had very much the worst of it.

"We have practically crippled their sea-power, blown up their submarine dockyard, and destroyed about half of their aerial fleet. I tell you this in order that you may receive her proposals with your eyes open. The course of events has made your Majesty to a great extent the arbiter of the destinies of humanity.

"Olga Romanoff knows that you have a splendid army at command, that you have illimitable wealth to spend on war material, and that an alliance between you would be irresistible. As an independent sovereign it is, of course, within your right, as it is within your power, to conclude this alliance if you think fit. Do so if you choose; but remember that if you do you must assume the tremendous responsibility of plunging the whole world into war, and bringing inconceivable desolation upon your fellow-creatures. You will be allying yourself with the worst enemies of humanity—nay, with the only enemies that humanity has on earth.

"This Olga Romanoff is called by her followers the Syren of the Skies, and the name is an apt one, for she is a very syren, armed with arts that can charm a man's heart out of his

breast, make him forget his duty to himself and his loyalty to his race, and, like Circe of old, reduce him to an animal that exists only for the execution of her will and the gratification of her desires. I speak with knowledge; for I have felt, and through me the world will feel, the terrible force of her spells, and I tell you frankly, as man speaking honestly with man, that if you make this alliance there will be war between your people and mine to the death.

"As far as a single man can do so, you hold the fate of mankind in your hand, and within the next forty-eight hours you will decide it. Now I have done my duty, and given you such warning as I can. You will answer for your decision at the bar of God, and it is not for me to say more.

"Whether we meet again as enemies or not, let us part friends, and let me implore you, for the love of God and your kind, to rest content with what the Fates have already given you. You have raised the Moslem power to a pitch of splendour and dominion far beyond all its former glories. You have all that man could ask for"—

"Yes, as a man," interrupted the Sultan, who up to this point had listened with silent attention to Alan's quick, earnest words. "But not all that the Commander of the Faithful may be content with. I know not what the religion of your people is, but you know that the laws of mine command me, as they command every true Moslem, to plant the banner of the Prophet over the habitations of the infidel and to give the enemies of the Faith the choice between the sword and the Koran.

"It is not for mere conquest that I have created my armies and my fleet. It is in obedience to the commands of Heaven, which has given me the means of conquering the earth for Islam."

Khalid spoke rapidly and fiercely with heaving breast and eyes blazing with the lurid light of fanaticism. Alan heard him out in silence. Then his hand fell heavily on the Moslem's shoulder, and holding him at arm's length he looked him straight in the eyes and said, slowly and deliberately—

"Sultan, a man's faith, by whatever name it may be called, is no concern of ours. He is responsible for it to his God, and there is an end of it. But when you tell me that your faith commands you to force it with fire and sword upon the consciences of those who hold another creed, then I tell you to your face that you are a fanatic and a persecutor.

"Blood enough and to spare has been shed in the wars of creeds, and if I believed that you meant to revive the warfare between Cross and Crescent, I would strike you dead where you stand, as I struck your slave down just now. But I cannot believe it either of you or any other enlightened man.

"I am not in any mood to utter empty threats, but I am speaking no idle words when I tell you that the hour in which you make war on Christendom, either for political or religious conquest, shall be the hour in which you will hear the voice of Destiny speaking your own doom.

"More than that, I ask you now to pledge me your word as an honest man and a ruling King that for twelve months from now, at the very least, you will neither draw a sword nor fire a shot either against Anglo-Saxondom or any other Power."

He stopped, and took his hand from the Sultan's shoulder. Khalid recoiled and drew himself up to the full height of his royal stature as he replied—

"Prince of the Air—demi-god almost as you are—you must learn that the Commander of the Faithful is not to be dictated to on the roof of his own palace, even by you. Am I your slave that you should lay these commands upon me?"

Before he made any reply in words Alan communicated a few rapid orders to those in command of the two air-ships in the Aerian sign-language. The *Ithuriel* rose from above the *Vindaya*, as the Russian air-ship was named, and both vessels ranged themselves alongside the front of the terrace. The Sultan watched this manœuvre in helpless silence, well knowing that whatever it imported he was powerless to resist. Then Alan went on—

"Not my slave, Sultan, but my fellow-man, and as such I

will, if I can, and by any means within my power, prevent you from committing such a colossal crime as that which I am afraid I must now believe you are contemplating. Now listen well, for my words mean much.

"Those two air-ships could lay your capital, vast and splendid as it is, in ruins before to-morrow's sun rises, and as surely as those stars are shining above us they shall do so unless you give me the pledge I ask for. I ask it in the name of all humanity, and I will not spare a few thousands of lives to enforce it."

"If you could!" ejaculated the Sultan, half involuntarily. "I have heard much of your wonderful air-ships, but do you know that I have a hundred thousand soldiers in the city, and that I have hundreds of guns which will hurl their projectiles for miles into the air? If only one of the hundreds struck either of those vessels of yours, she would fall like a stone and be dashed to pieces on the earth. The fighting would not be all on one side."

His tone grew more and more defiant as he went on, and Alan saw that some stern lesson would be necessary to induce him to give the pledge upon which the safety of millions depended. In quiet, even tones, that contrasted strongly with those of the Moslem, he said—

"We of Aeria are not accustomed to boast our prowess lightly, and I am threatening nothing that I cannot do. Still, I do not wish you to give the pledge I ask save in the fullest knowledge. If you will trust yourself with me on board the *Ithuriel* for an hour under my pledge of your safe return I will prove to you to demonstration that your city would be as defenceless beneath our guns as a collection of tents would be. The moon is high enough now to give us plenty of light for the experiment if you think fit to make it."

The Sultan hesitated for a few moments, as though in doubt whether he would be permitted to return if he once allowed the *Ithuriel* to carry him away from the earth. Then he remembered that no man had ever known the Aerian who had broken his word. He looked into Alan's strong, frank

face, and read there an absolute assurance that his safety would be respected. Then, with a slight inclination of his head, he said—

"Your words are wise. I will come, and if you convince me that you can do as you say I will swear by the holy name of the Prophet that I will make no war upon any man for a year from now."

Alan signalled to the *Ithuriel*, which ran in close to the terrace. The door of the deck-chamber opened, a gangway was run out, and for the first time in his life Sultan Khalid trod the deck of a cruiser of the air. The *Ithuriel* and the *Vindaya* at once mounted up into the now brightly moonlit atmosphere.

The Sultan saw the myriad lights of his splendid capital sink swiftly down into a vast abyss that seemed to open beneath him. The dim horizon widened out until it enclosed an immense expanse of pale grey desert to the south, while to the north a dark stretch of sea spread out farther than the eye could reach. Up and up the air-ships soared until the lights of Alexandria glimmered like a faint white mist at the bottom of a seemingly unfathomable gulf. At length Alan, who was standing beside him, pointed down and said—

"There is your city. If I gave the word, a hundred shells a minute would be rained on to it from here. Do you think your guns could reach us?"

"No," said the Sultan, striving in vain to repress a shudder at the fearful prospect disclosed by Alan's words. "But how could your shells strike that little patch of light which is miles away, and thousands of feet below us?"

"That, too, I will prove to you, but not at the expense of your city."

He sent an order to the engine-room, and the *Ithuriel* swerved round to the northward and, followed by the *Vindaya*, swept out over the Mediterranean, in the direction of Crete.

Half an hour's flight at full speed brought them in sight of a small rocky islet which showed like a black spot on the surface of the moonlit sea. The two air-ships were stopped

six thousand feet above the water, and about four miles from the heap of rocks. Alan then gave orders for each of the ships to train four guns upon it.

"Now," he said to the Sultan, "fix your glass on that mass of rocks down yonder and watch what happens."

As he spoke he raised his hand and the eight guns were discharged simultaneously. The Sultan heard no report and saw no flash, but a few seconds later he saw through the night glasses that Alan had given him a vast mass of flame of dazzling brilliancy burst out over the islet, covering it completely, for the moment, with a mist of fire.

"Now you shall see the effects of our shells," said Alan. The two vessels sank rapidly down in a slanting direction towards the spot where the projectiles had struck. A hundred feet from the surface of the water they stopped, and Alan said—

"Now look for the island."

Khalid swept the sea with his glass. The islet had vanished, the waves were breaking over what seemed to be a sunken reef, and that was all. With hands that trembled, in spite of all that he could do to keep them steady, he took the glass from his eyes, saying in a voice that was shaken by irresistible emotion—

"God is great, and I am but a man, while you are as demigods. It is enough! I will give the pledge you ask for."

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE.

WITHIN a couple of hours after the destruction of the islet Sultan Khalid was back in his palace, and the *Ithuriel* and the *Vindaya* had departed with their prisoners of war for Kerguelen.

Alan, quite content with the advantage he had gained by obtaining the Sultan's pledge of peace for a year, in comparison with which even the capture of one of the Russian air-ships was of trifling importance, had determined not to run the needless risk of an encounter with Olga's fleet, for he had learnt the strength of it from Lossenski, and saw that it would be madness to attack it.

Added to this there was far more important work in hand for him to do, for it was absolutely imperative that a full report of what he had discovered with regard to the proposed alliance between Olga and the Sultan should be laid before the Council with as little delay as possible, for if it ever became an accomplished fact it could not fail to enormously complicate the coming struggle for the mastery of the world.

Therefore, as soon as he had placed a prize crew on board the *Vindaya*, under the command of Alexis, he gave orders for the two air-ships to proceed southward at full speed, having bidden the Sultan farewell on the terrace of his palace, and left him to draw what moral he could from the brief but startling experience that the midnight hours had brought him.

A few minutes before twelve on the following night the

inhabitants of Alexandria were thrown into a state of the most intense excitement by a marvellous appearance in the southern heavens. Long streams of light, which in power and brilliancy excelled even the great electric suns with which the city was lighted, shot down out of the skies, flashing hither and thither, and sweeping the earth below it in vast curves of radiance.

Now they streamed out in a huge fan of endless horizontal rays which seemed to reach to the horizon, and now they crossed each other in a network of beams, changing their positions with a rapidity which dazzled and bewildered the beholders. Then they were projected vertically to the zenith as though challenging the stars, and then they blazed straight down upon the earth, bringing into strong relief of light and shadow everything they fell upon.

Instantly the spacious streets were crowded with excited throngs of people, and millions of eyes were cast heavenwards watching the approach of the Syren and her aerial squadron.

The twenty air-ships swept up out of the south at a speed of about a hundred miles an hour in the form of a wide crescent, with the *Revenge* in the centre. They slowed down as they neared the city, and the concentrated blaze of their lights soon fell upon the Sultan's palace, the magnificent proportions of which distinguished it conspicuously even from the thousands of splendid edifices which adorned the Moslem metropolis.

Then, still keeping their relative positions with perfect accuracy, the winged vessels sank downwards and wheeled round until they faced the eastern terrace on which stood the Sultan with his Grand Vizier and the chief officers of his household, awaiting the coming of his aerial visitors.

The flotilla stopped a hundred feet from the terrace. Its search-lights were extinguished, but the strange and beautiful shapes of the cruisers of the air stood out sharply defined against the bright background formed by the myriad lights of the city.

The *Revenge*, flying the long vanished Imperial Standard of Russia, with its crowned black eagle on a broad ground of gold, at the mizzen, the white flag of peace at the main, and the Star

and Crescent of the Moslem Empire at the fore, floated slowly forward till her shining ram projected over the parapet and her three keels rested lightly upon it.

Then one of the forward doors of the deck-chamber was drawn back by some invisible agency, and the Sultan saw standing in the opening such a vision of loveliness as he had never imagined even in his dreams of the houris of Paradise. Clothed, according to her invariable custom, in a plain clinging robe of royal purple, with no other ornament than a coronet, consisting of a plain broad band of gold from which rose above her temples two wings of silver filigree thickly encrusted with diamonds, Olga Romanoff stood upon the deck of her flagship the perfect incarnation of royal dignity and womanly beauty.

Khalid, who had advanced to the parapet as the squadron approached, saw instantly that this could be none other than the woman whom Alan Arnold had described as beautiful beyond description and evil beyond comprehension. Few men had seen so many beautiful women as he had, and there were scores of them waiting in his harem for the favouring glance that none could win from him; but no sooner did his upward glance rest upon the vision that was looking down upon him from the doorway of the deck-chamber of the *Revenge* than his eyes fell and his head bowed in the involuntary homage that the supreme beauty of such a woman has always claimed from such a man.

Evil she might be, but evil in such a shape might be something more than good in the eyes of some men, and of these Khalid the Magnificent was one. His hot Arab blood was aflame the instant that he looked upon her intoxicating loveliness, and half her errand was accomplished before a word had passed between them.

She returned his greeting with a gracious inclination of her wing-crowned head, and as she did so he said—

"The Tsarina is welcome! My house and all that is in it is hers if she will honour me by entering it, for she will make it more beautiful by her presence."

"Your Majesty's welcome is sweet in my ears," she

answered, almost insensibly adopting his Oriental style of speech, "for I come as a friend and I hope to go as an ally."

The gangway stairs dropped as she spoke, and as they did so the Sultan made a sign and a pair of attendants brought forward some steps covered with crimson velvet, which they placed so that she could descend from the parapet, to which the Sultan himself ascended to meet her as she came down. Taking her hand on the parapet, he led her down to the terrace with the grace of a king and the deference of a courtier. Then he bent low over her hand and kissed it, and as he did so the attendant officers of his empire bowed in silent and respectful salutation.

Olga was at once conducted to one of the state apartments of the palace in which the Sultan was wont to receive his most distinguished guests. She was treated with even more respect than would have been accorded to one of the crowned monarchs of the earth, for not only her wonderful beauty and royal carriage, but the marvellous manner of her coming and the tremendous power represented by the flotilla of air-ships inspired both the Sultan and his subjects with a deference that amounted almost to homage.

Then, too, the mystery and romance which invested her name and family and fortune distinguished her as a woman apart from all other women in the world. It might be, as Alan had told the Sultan, that she was really the enemy of the human race, that her true object was to destroy the peace of the world, and rekindle the fires of war on earth, but still the present romance was stronger than the future, and possibly problematical, reality, and so it would hardly be too much to say that Olga had succeeded in removing the impression left by Alan on Khalid's mind before she had been an hour under his roof.

She naturally expected that one of the first to receive her would be the ambassador who had preceded her, but, after looking anxiously for him and not finding him either on the terrace or in the reception-room, she turned to Khalid and said—

"I do not see my ambassador here, and yet he must have arrived, since your Majesty tells me that you have been expecting me."

The Sultan's face darkened, and his brows slightly contracted, as he replied—

"Tsarina, I have been waiting for an opportunity to tell you what cannot but be unwelcome news. Your ambassador, Orloff Lossenski, is not here"—

"What!" cried Olga, half rising from her seat, "not here! Surely he has not presumed to leave before my arrival? I can hardly believe that of him."

"He has gone, nevertheless," said the Sultan, "though not by his will or mine, I can assure you. Scarcely had his vessel alighted on the terrace yonder, and he had disembarked, when an Aerian cruiser dropped down as silently as a shadow from the skies.

"Whence it came I know not, but it would seem that these Aerians see everything, and that their hands reach everywhere. In a moment she had dropped upon your ambassador's vessel, splintering her masts, and yet so softly did she alight that the glass dome was not broken. Then her crew streamed out of the doors of the deck-chamber, and the next I knew was that your ambassador and I were covered by half a score of pistols and rifles and commanded to stand still on pain of death.

"Then Alan Arnold alighted, forced your envoy to surrender, struck one of my guards dead by some mysterious lightning that flashed from his sword, and, after carrying me away into the air over the sea and blasting a rock out of the waters to prove to me the power of his guns, brought me back honourably and in safety to await your coming. Truly these Aerians are more as gods than men!"

Furious as the unexpected tidings made her, Olga yet managed to restrain her anger sufficiently to reply with wonderful coolness—

"Your Majesty gives me sad and bitter news; but it is the fortune of war, and I must not complain. The air-ship that

is taken by surprise is lost, and Orloff Lossenski fell a victim to his own carelessness."

Then her mood changed swiftly, and a soft and musical laugh came from her smiling lips as she went on—

"But it is a poor revenge, after all. That same Alan Arnold, the son of the great President of Aeria, was my would-be lover and slave for over five years. For my sake he turned traitor to his name and race, gave up the *Revenge* to me and told me all the jealously-guarded secrets of aerial navigation. He killed my brother in a quarrel, but he was useful, so I let him live—a prisoner of war, till I had done with him. Then I set him free, when, perhaps, I ought to have kept him safe, to go and tell his people what a fool I had made of him. I suppose he did not tell your Majesty that?"

"No," laughed Khalid in reply, wondering what magic she had used to accomplish so marvellous a charm, "he did not. But such a miracle proves that you have been truly named the Syren of the Skies, as he said you are, for no other woman could have worked such a wonder and disputed the empire of the air with the masters of the world."

"That is true," replied Olga, lowering her voice to a tone of intense earnestness, "and the fact that I did it single-handed proves, I hope, that with good friends and true allies I can do more than dispute that empire with the Aerians, these despots of peace who have made the world a paradise of the commonplace, and fettered all strongest and most aspiring spirits so that they might be equal with the coward and the fool.

"But those are matters which I would discuss with your Majesty in private, and it is too late in the night to go into them now. You tell me that Alan Arnold has shown you what his air-ships can do. If your Majesty will honour the *Revenge* by being my guest for to-morrow I will show you that mine are in nowise inferior to them.

"Indeed, as I have told you, the *Revenge* is an Aerian ship, built in the enchanted land of Aeria, and if you will to-morrow she shall carry you over the whole of your dominions, and after

that over those other dominions that shall be yours if you approve the plans that I will lay before you."

She paused and looked at Khalid with cheeks glowing and eyes shining with enthusiasm and passion. He returned her glance with one no less fiery and passionate as he replied—

"I will be your guest, as you say, but the honour and the favour will be to me, your Majesty—for Majesty you are, crowned by the hand of favouring Nature with that which makes all men your subjects. Your air-ships shall rest in the garden of my palace to-night, and an hour after sunrise you shall find me ready for another journey to the skies, for my first experience has given me a taste for more. Till then farewell. The memory of your eyes will make me dream of Paradise to-night!"

There was that in his tone which told Olga that his words meant more than a neatly turned Oriental compliment, and as he stooped and kissed her hand in leave-taking she said half in jest and half in earnest—

"And I shall dream of the nearer glories of the world-empire which your Majesty and I may in the not very distant future divide between us."

"Or share together!" said Khalid in his soul, as he raised his head again and their eyes met.

At the appointed time the next morning the squadron rose into the air from the palace gardens. In order to produce as widespread an effect as possible, Olga had extended her invitation to the Grand Vizier and about a score of the Sultan's highest officials, including the commanders of his armies and fleets who happened to be in Alexandria at the time. These were distributed among the twenty air-ships, but Olga took care to arrange matters so that only the Grand Vizier should accompany the Sultan on board the *Revenge*.

In order that the Vizier, who was a cool-headed, wary, far-seeing man of nearly seventy, and therefore beyond the power of her own personal spells, might not interfere with her designs upon his master, she lost no time in placing him under

the power of the drug which she had already used with such disastrous results to the world.

Although he had said nothing about it, she felt certain that Khalid must have been warned by Alan of the danger of taking anything to eat or drink from her hands, and therefore she had decided to make no attempt upon his liberty of will, unless it became absolutely necessary to do so; but the Vizier was easily taken unawares, and she had little difficulty in causing him to drink a cup of coffee while her chief engineer was explaining the working of the machinery to the Sultan in the engine-room.

The coffee, of course, contained a sufficient quantity of the drug to deprive the Vizier of all power of opposing her will or resisting her suggestions for many hours to come. So far as all independent advice was concerned, he was safely disposed of.

The air-ships rose to an elevation of some two thousand feet, and at a speed of two hundred miles an hour ran first along the valley of the Nile to the southward. At Khartoum they swerved to the eastward, crossed the mountains of the Red Sea littoral at a height of nine thousand feet, then sank again and skirted the Arabian coast until Mecca, the sacred city of Islam, came in sight.

The ancient temple of the Kaaba, containing the tomb of the Prophet, still stood, almost unchanged by the hand of time, amid the splendid buildings, verdant gardens, and long groves of palms with which the new Mecca of the twenty-first century was adorned. Pointing down towards it, Olga said to the Sultan, who was standing by her side on the deck, dazzled by the splendours of the swiftly-changing prospects of the scene below—

"There is the Holy City, which your Majesty may some day make the religious capital of the world. That would be an achievement worthy of the Commander of the Faithful and the descendant of the Prophet, would it not?"

Khalid looked down at the city, over which they were now speeding in the direction of Medinah, and was silent for a few moments; then he raised his eyes to hers and said—

"Even so; but have you counted the cost of achieving it to me and my people? Before the banner of the Crescent could float over a world-wide empire of Islam we should have to triumph in a war which would involve the whole human race, and this means that we should first have to destroy those who have been lords of the earth and of the air for more than a century."

"The Aerians are but men," said Olga, a trifle coldly. "Why should your Majesty fear them if you are armed with the same weapons that they wield? I suppose Alan Arnold has threatened you and your people with nothing less than annihilation should you conclude this alliance with me? But why should you fear? I have met the Aerians in battle, and you see I am not annihilated."

"I do not fear them as personal enemies," replied Khalid proudly, "but only as the possible destroyers of my people, who would be defenceless against them. Think of the destruction you could rain upon the sacred city down yonder, while it could strike no blow in return. That would be the fate of Alexandria and all the capitals of my empire, and while my armies were marching to the conquest of Christendom our homes would be laid in ruins and our wives and children slain without mercy.

"Show me," he continued, speaking more earnestly and rapidly, "how they are to be protected against this, and our alliance may become possible."

"It is purely a matter of relative strength," replied Olga. Do you know why this squadron of mine is allowed to pursue its way unmolested, although the Aerians know of its existence? It is because, although, as Alan Arnold truly told you, by superior skill and experience in handling their ships they have been able to destroy about half my fleet, I am still stronger in the air than they are, and they know that we have now gained the experience which we lacked.

"They have only three vessels, counting the one you saw captured, as swift and powerful as this, while I have twenty-six. None of their smaller vessels dare venture within reach of

my guns, for to do so would be to meet certain destruction. They are doubtless building others as strong and swift as these in preparation for the struggle which they know must come. But if we join hands against them we shall be stronger than they will be when the year of your truce is ended.

"My engineers shall teach yours how to build air-ships in all respects equal to these, and submarine cruisers, a dozen of which could destroy your present navies in a day. With all the resources of your empire at command, you could possess in a year from now an aerial navy of a thousand ships and a sea fleet of equal strength.

"Then you would be strong enough to sweep the seas from pole to pole, and to storm the mountain battlements of Aeria itself. You must not forget that what the Aerians could do to your cities you could do to Aeria and to all the capitals of Christendom. City for city, you could take your revenge, until"—

"Until the whole earth was laid waste and the habitations of men were desolate," broke in Khalid, overwhelmed by the horror of the prospect. "It is too great a price to pay, even for the empire of the world and the supremacy of Islam, even if we survived the ruin that we should have brought upon the world."

"Too great if there were any need to pay it," said Olga quickly, seeing that her lust of conquest and revenge had carried her too far. "But matters will never come to such a pass as that.

"Our battlefields will be the countries that we shall invade and conquer, not our own, and enough air-ships can be devoted to the defence of your cities to repel any attack the Aerians may make upon them. Your Majesty must not forget, too, that they will not dare to send any very large force away from Aeria, for they well know that the final battle for the possession of the earth will have to be fought out round the summits of its mountains."

"You are right and I was wrong, Tsarina," said the Sultan in an altered tone, "and the Prophet has said of the infidel,

'Such as are stubborn and refuse the true faith ye shall slay without mercy. Kill them wherever ye find them'—but alas"—

He stopped suddenly and looked at her, and she could see a smile moving his lips under his black beard and moustache. She divined instantly what was passing in his mind, and saw the opportunity for a stroke of diplomacy which, base as it was, she made without a moment's hesitation. Before he could continue, she turned and faced him, looking into his eyes with a glance that dazzled him, and said in a low, quick, earnest tone—

"I know what you would say, Sultan Khalid. You would say that I and my people are infidels in your eyes, and therefore worthy of destruction. I have thought of that—but the deck is too public a place for the discussion of such a matter. Call your Vizier and we will retire to my own saloon and talk of it there."

Khalid obeyed, wondering what was coming next from the lips of the Syren whose fatal beauty of person and subtlety of mind were luring him on to plunge into an ocean of blood of which no human eyes could see the further shore—if it had one at all—and as soon as the three were seated in the room, which had once been Alan's, Olga, addressing the Vizier first, rapidly but very clearly sketched out the project that had been suggested to her by Lossenski, and then, turning to the Sultan, she said—

"There seems now but one real bar to such an alliance, and that is the difference in our faiths, or, I should rather say, in our creeds. I have not ignored this; nay, I have pondered it deeply and earnestly. Creeds change with times, and Russia, like the rest of Europe, has now no real, living faith like yours. But you shall give it to them if you wish, and the day that I am proclaimed Empress of the Russias the Crescent shall shine on the towers of the Kremlin."

"What do I hear?" cried Khalid, springing to his feet in amazement at her astounding words; "you and your people will accept the Koran and acknowledge the Prophet?"

"I will and they shall," said Olga calmly and firmly, committing herself to the huge apostasy without a tremor in her voice. "Remember, too, that millions who should by right be my subjects in Asia are already good Moslems. If the Russians refuse to obey me in this they will be rebels, and you shall do with them as you will do with the other peoples of Christendom if they remain stubborn. Let your Majesty's chief minister and favourite counsellor speak and say whether or not I have spoken fairly."

"Speak, Musa al Ghazi!" said the Sultan, in a voice that betrayed intense emotion, "and weigh your words well, for many and great issues may depend upon them."

"Commander of the Faithful!" said the old man, speaking slowly and with some hesitation, as though he were repeating a lesson hardly yet learnt, "I can speak but the words that my soul echoes from without. A strange power has seemed to take possession of me, and I speak as one to whom another has taught what he should say.

"Yet the words seem wise to me, and I will speak them, lest, not doing so, I should have to answer for my negligence. If it is written that you shall be the one chosen of Heaven to plant the Crescent where now falls the shadow of the Cross, and reign supreme, sole lord of a Moslem world, then have the means been sent to you by the hand of her who gives you the means of measuring strength with the masters of the nations, by whose pleasure we possess that which we have, and without whose countenance your Majesty would not much longer remain Commander of the Faithful.

"I would not willingly speak words of offence, but it is necessary to recognise that the Moslem practises his faith only by permission of those who, if they hold any, hold another."

"By the Beard of the Prophet, thou hast said it, Musa! I am a King by permission, a High Priest of Islam by sufferance of the infidel!" exclaimed Khalid, as the hot blood rushed to his swarthy cheeks and the fire of fanaticism leapt into his eyes.

"But I will be so mean a thing no longer than the time of

the truce to which I have pledged my word. In the blood of the infidel I will wipe out this shame on Islam, yea, though the whole earth shall be drenched with the blood and tears that shall be licked up by the fires of war. It is my destiny, and I will do it, or my name shall perish from the earth for ever!

"Tsarina Olga, I have seen and heard enough. Let us return to my palace and arrange the terms of our alliance; and when you have sworn upon the Koran that you will take Allah for your God and Mohammed for your Prophet, I will sign them, and together we will conquer the world for Islam. It is kismet, and that which is written shall be done!"

Olga looked upon the splendid figure of the Sultan as he stood before her, his athletic form dilated and his face glorified by the passion of religious fervour that was burning within him, and as she did so a new light dawned upon her. She saw that this strong, fiery soul might some day conquer even hers, and fuse it into itself.

It would be an unholy union, a love bought with apostasy from her faith and sealed with treachery to her people and the trust that she had inherited from her forefathers; but what were apostasy and treachery to her now that the love she had stained her soul with blood and untold crime to win was lost to her for ever?

Earthly pomp and power, the pomp of imperial rule and the power of life and death, of happiness and misery, over millions of her fellow-creatures were well worth living for, and with them might come love again, or if not love, then passion, fierce and all-consuming, for this one king of earth who dared to be a king in fact as well as in name, and then— Before she could make any reply to the Sultan's words, the slow, measured tones of the Vizier sounded again, saying—

"If I may speak again, Majesties"—

"Say on, good Musa!" said the Sultan, "for so far thou hast spoken the words of wisdom."

"I would say," continued the old man, "that even as the winged steed Alborak bore the Prophet from earth to the

Seventh Heaven, so may it be written that the winged ship of Tsarina Olga shall bear thee, my Master, into that Paradise of love which so far thou hast sought and not found."

"What say you, well-named Syren of the Skies, to that?" said Khalid, taking a step towards the couch on which Olga was sitting, and making a half-appealing gesture with both his hands.

She rose to her feet and faced him. One look into his passion-lighted eyes told her that the victory was already won, and that strength could now give place to softness. She dropped her eyes before his burning gaze, and, crossing her hands upon her bosom with a pretty semblance of submission, said, in a low, sweet tone that he heard now for the first time—

"All things are possible, and if this be possible, then more than Cleopatra lost for Antony I will win for you, and you shall reign sole Cæsar of a subject world. As for me, when that comes to pass, let it be to me as it shall seem good in the eyes of my lord the King!"

And so saying she bowed slightly before him and turned and passed out of the saloon, seeing the vision of him whom she had loved in vain through the mist of tears which rose in that instant to her eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MOMENTOUS COMMISSION.

WELVE hours after they had left the Sultan on the terrace of his palace, the *Ithuriel* and the *Vindaya* dropped through the clouds on to the snow-covered surface of Kerguelen Island, and within an hour the despatch-vessel *Vega* was speeding away north-westward to Aeria with a full account of the results achieved by the first cruise of the *Ithuriel*.

The twenty-four hours which would have to elapse before the reply of the Council could be received were employed in repairing the damage done to the *Vindaya*, and in renewing the motive-power and ammunition of both vessels. Sundry small but effective improvements in the mechanism and appointments of the *Vindaya* were also made, and last, but by no means least important, the name of the prize was changed.

"You are henceforth her commander, old fellow," said Alan to Alexis when the question of the new name came up, "and therefore it is for you to say what her name shall be."

"I knew you would say that," replied Alexis, his grave, thoughtful face lighting up with a quick flush and an almost boyish smile, "and, of course, I needn't tell you what name I should like above all things to give her, but, then, you see"—

"I see nothing but a quite unaccountable embarrassment

written largely upon those ingenuous features of yours, my blushing Achates," interrupted Alan, with a laugh that deepened the colour on his friend's cheeks.

"Well, you see, I'm not quite sure whether she would like it under the circumstances," said Alexis hesitatingly.

"I didn't know that air-ships had any choice in the question of their names any more than children have," said Alan, gravely stroking his beard and looking at his friend with a laugh in his eyes.

"Don't assume a density that the gods have not given you," laughed Alexis in return. "You know very well who the she is to whom I refer. Now, suppose you were going to name and command the *Vindaya*, what would you call her?"

"I would do as you want to do, my friend," said Alan, laughing outright now, "although, I fear, with more chance of getting snubbed for my temerity, and trust to winning forgiveness from the lips of her name-mother by good service and hard hitting."

"Perfectly reasoned!" exclaimed Alexis, "and so henceforth, until I have express orders to call her something else—the *Forlorn Hope*, for instance—she shall be the *Isma*, and on her decks I will win the right to ask—I mean to wear the golden wings again, or else she will never cross the confines of Aeria."

"You will win more than the golden wings, I hope and believe," said Alan, now very serious again, "for you evidently have a better chance of forgiveness than I have, though I don't despair, mind you, for I am determined never to go back to Aeria unless I feel that I can fairly ask Alma to forgive what is past. And if she refuses I will hunt Olga Romanoff to the ends of the earth till I take her alive, and then I will carry her to Aeria, and at Alma's feet I will strike her dead with my own hand so that she may know the truth!"

"Amen," said Alexis, striding forward and taking his hand. "And if Alma says 'No' to you I will never see Isma's

face again till I have helped you to clip the Syren's wings, and take her to meet her just reward. It is a bargain! Between us we will bring these proud damozels to sweet reasonableness. Now let us go and get a bottle of sparkling Aerian, and rename the *Vindaya* in proper form."

Thus it came to pass that when the *Ithuriel* next took the air her consort bore the name that was dearest to her commander's heart.

The anxiously-expected *Vega* did not return till nearly thirty hours after her departure. The delay proved that the Council had considered the tidings that she had brought of great importance, and had therefore taken some time to deliberate over them. This turned out to be the case, and the decision arrived at by the rulers of Aeria showed that they looked upon the crisis as grave in the last degree.

The return despatch stated that within twenty-four hours after the arrival of the *Vega* at Kerguelen a fleet of fifty airships would be at the disposal of Alan and Alexis, who were ordered to place themselves at the head of it and proceed with all speed to Alexandria, taking Orloff Lossenski and the other Russian prisoners with them.

Alan was to be the bearer of an ultimatum to the Sultan confirming, in the name of the President and Council of Aeria, the provisional declaration of war which he had threatened as the result of an alliance with Olga Romanoff, and stating that at sunrise on the 16th of May in the following year, hostilities would be commenced against him, and continued to the point of extermination so far as all men who bore arms were concerned.

He was also called upon to order the Russian squadron to leave his capital, should it still be there, within two hours. If he refused, or if Olga declined to remove her ships, they were to be engaged there and then, and, if possible, destroyed at all costs. This latter part of the message was to be conveyed to Olga in a different form by the hands of Lossenski, who was then to be set at liberty with his fellow-prisoners.

If Olga consented to go within the given time, it would be

necessary to allow her to depart unmolested, as the superior speed of her ships would place the bulk of the Aerian fleet at a hopeless disadvantage in a pursuit, and expose it to certain destruction. If she insisted on fighting, then, of course, the hazard of battle must be taken, and the Council relied upon the commanders of its fleet to do their duty as their judgment should point it out to them. No specific terms were to be made with Olga and her adherents, but hostilities were, if possible, to be avoided until the Sultan's year of truce had expired, and the new Aerian fleet was ready to take the air.

If no fighting took place Alan was to proceed with his squadron to London with a third despatch to the King of Britain, as head of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, advising him, in the face of the threatening danger, to call together the rulers of Anglo-Saxondom and take immediate measures for mutual defence against the Moslems in case they should invade Europe when the year of truce was up. For this purpose arms in any quantities that might be needed would be sent out from Aeria, and the Aerians would undertake the task of drilling the newly-formed armies and instructing them in the use of the weapons.

In addition to this the necessary works and power-stations for building and equipping at least a thousand of the largest air-ships were to be established under Aerian control in England, and at the same time dockyards were to be set up for the construction of an equal number of submarine vessels of the *Narwhal* type. It was, however, to be made an absolute condition of this assistance and protection that the armies and aerial and sea navies were to be entirely officered by Aerians, and were to be under the unquestioned control of the President of Aeria.

This condition was, for obvious reasons, held by the Council to be absolutely essential to success. Divided commands in the face of a foe which would obey blindly the orders of a single chief who had already shown that he could create armies and fleets of high efficiency, would mean inevitable

failure and disaster. Therefore the absolute control of Anglo-Saxondom must once more be placed in the hands of the Supreme Council until the danger was passed and peace was restored, or Aeria would fight the battle alone and leave the nations of Anglo-Saxondom to their fate.

The immediate effect of the orders brought by the *Vega* was to throw the station of Kerguelen into a state of the most intense activity. Alan at once assumed command by common consent, and, assisted by Alexis, Admiral Forrest, and Captain Ernstein, got everything in readiness for the reception of the coming squadron from Aeria. All the defences of the station were also thoroughly inspected, from the air-ships floating above the clouds to the submarine mines which guarded the entrances to the harbours, and a general plan of the now inevitable campaign was sketched out at a council of war held on the evening of the *Vega's* return.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the orders from head-quarters put both Alan and Alexis into the highest spirits. They had already vindicated their claim to the confidence of the Council and their fellow-countrymen, and the claim had been allowed without stint or hesitation.

Though their year of probation had only just begun they found themselves intrusted with a mission, dangerous it is true, but also of the most supreme importance, and Alan in particular felt his pulses thrill with justifiable pride when he found himself charged with the glorious task of doing almost exactly what his great ancestor, Alan Tremayne, had done a hundred and thirty years before, when he marshalled the millions of Anglo-Saxondom against the leagued despotisms of Europe and overthrew them in the mighty conflict which had given peace on earth for nearly five generations.

Whether he would succeed as the Chief of the Terror had done depended not upon himself so much as on Anglo-Saxondom itself. If the once conquering race of earth had kept intact its old martial strength and imperial spirit through the long years of peace and prosperity as its kindred in Aeria had done, all would be well, and the disturbers of the welfare

of humanity would pay dearly and bitterly for their tremendous crime.

But if, like the Romans of old, they had allowed the tropical atmosphere of material luxury to relax the fibres of their once sturdy nature and weaken the arms which had once enclosed the world in their embrace, then his mission would fail, however eloquently he might urge it. A desolation infinitely greater than that which overwhelmed Rome or Byzantium would fall upon Anglo-Saxondom, and its name would be the only monument of its vanished glory.

But the *Vega* brought something more to Alan and Alexis than the despatches and orders of the Council. This was a letter from Isma to Alan, filled with the tenderest expressions of delight at the triumphs which he and his "companion in arms" had already achieved, and of brave and hopeful confidence in them, despite the terrible dangers that they were going forth to confront.

The letter concluded with the significant sentence—"When you come back in triumph, as I know you will, there will not be one heart in Aeria that will not beat more gladly for your sakes, not one hand that will not be stretched out to greet you either in friendship or in love. Remember this against the day of battle, and in the day of peace you shall see how true my words are."

Although the letter made no mention of Alma, save as one of the intimate friends who sent their "loving greetings" to the two men who were going to lead the navy of Aeria to what might be the first battle of a war that would be the most colossal and unsparing struggle ever waged on earth, Alan was able to read enough between the lines to give him hope.

He knew enough of Alma's proud and sensitive nature to fully understand why no word had come directly from her to him, and also to recognise that the task of winning her back from her estrangement would be no light one. Indeed, of the two tasks which lay before him, the conquest of the world and the reconquest of Alma's heart, he looked with less misgiving upon the former than he did upon the latter. Still he by no

means despaired, and what he had said to Alexis was justified in his mind by the belief that in Isma he had the most eloquent of advocates always at Alma's side, pleading his cause even better than he could do it himself, at anyrate for the present.

As for Alexis, his lover's eyes and more sanguine temperament found in the letter ample justification for the re-naming of the *Vindaya*, and if he forgot to return the precious sheet of paper to Alan after he had read its contents, it was because he honestly felt that he had the better right to it, and his companion in love and war apparently recognised this, for he carefully refrained from asking him for it. Thus well comforted with new-born hope, and impatiently longing to begin the momentous work in hand, whether it was to be war or diplomacy, they awaited the arrival of the promised fleet from Aeria, which was expected to alight on the surface of Kerguelen about noon on the day after the arrival of the *Vega*.

A few minutes before twelve o'clock on the 19th of May one of the look-out vessels floating five thousand feet above the clouds which overhung Desolation Land telephoned, "Fleet from Aeria in sight," and half an hour after the receipt of the anxiously-expected news at headquarters the fifty air-ships were grouped round the power-station at the head of Christmas Harbour, renewing the motive power which had been expended on the voyage from Aeria.

When this operation was completed the fleet was equipped for a voyage of thirty thousand miles if necessary. As every vessel was completely furnished with all stores and munitions of war, no further preparations had been made, and Alan was able to give the signal for the flotilla to take the air in little more than an hour after its arrival at Kerguelen.

It was divided into two divisions of twenty-five ships each, one led by the *Ithuriel* and the other by the *Isma*, and these rose into the air, formed in two straight lines each about a quarter of a mile long. The two flagships flew one on either flank, and slightly ahead and above the main body. This

formation enabled any signals made from either of them to be instantly seen by every ship in the fleet.

The distance to be traversed was five thousand eight hundred geographical miles, and the voyage was performed at a speed of four hundred miles an hour without incident.

At daybreak on the 20th, the two divisions were floating in a wide circle six thousand feet above Alexandria at a sufficient distance to be practically invisible from the city, which nevertheless lay completely at the mercy of the four hundred guns which were trained upon it, and which, if the terms of the Council's ultimatum were not accepted by the Sultan and Olga, would reduce it to a wilderness of ruins within an hour from the signal to fire being given.

That the Russians were still the guests of the Sultan was made apparent as soon as the light became strong enough for their squadron to be seen resting on the earth in the gardens of the palace, with one look-out ship stationed about fifteen hundred feet above the roof of the palace. When all the ships were in their stations the *Ithuriel* and the *Isma* ran up close to each other, and Alexis boarded the flagship to receive his final instructions from Alan, who had undertaken the perilous duty of conveying the ultimatum to the Sultan and his possible ally.

Orloff Lossenski was on board the *Ithuriel*, and Alan requested him to be present when Alexis received his orders. As he shook hands with the Vice-Admiral, Alan said—

"I have asked Orloff Lossenski to hear our last arrangements made so that he may recognise as well as we do that this is a matter of life and death for all of us. For my own part, I am determined that the wishes of the Council shall be obeyed, or the *Ithuriel* and her crew shall be buried with our enemies in the ruins of Alexandria.

"We have not been seen yet from the Russian look-out ship, but they will of course see the *Ithuriel* going down. I shall descend flying a flag of truce, and I feel certain that the Sultan will recognise it himself and compel his allies to do so. But if not, if a single shot is fired, or if the Russian squadron

attempts to rise in the air until my return, you are to give the signal to open fire upon the city, and the fleet is not to cease firing until it is destroyed.

"You are to forget that you are destroying friends as well as foes, for I and all on board the *Ithuriel* recognise that the honour of Aeria and the safety of the world demand the sacrifice, and we are resolved to make it.

"I not only order this as your superior in command, I ask it as a friend and brother in arms. I know you would gladly die in the same cause if necessary, and so you must not hesitate to kill me and destroy the *Ithuriel* if the fortune of war compels you to do so."

Alan's speech, spoken with the perfect steadiness of an unalterable resolve, found a fitting response in the breast of his companion in arms. Still holding his friend's hand in what might be a farewell clasp, Alexis simply replied—

"I see the necessity, and I will obey to the letter! God grant that you may all return safe and sound; but if you don't, you shall have such a tomb as no man ever had before. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Alan in the same steady tone, and then their hands parted, and Alexis returned to his ship.

"Now, Orloff Lossenski," said Alan, turning to the Russian, "you have heard my instructions, and you know that they will be obeyed. Neither you nor your mistress have any right to expect mercy at my hands, and you shall have none. Obey my orders to the letter, and see that your mistress does the same, or Alexandria will be in ruins before that sun reaches the zenith."

"I have heard and I will obey, for the fortune of war is with you and I must," replied Lossenski, completely overmastered by the heroic devotion displayed by Alan in what bade fair to be a crisis in the fate of the world.

A broad white flag of truce was now flown from the aftermast of the *Ithuriel*. At the fore flew as a greeting to the Sultan the Star and Crescent of Islam, while above both at the main floated the sky-blue banner of Aeria, emblazoned

with the golden wings united by a mailed hand armed with a dagger. With every man at his station and every gun ready for instant use, the flagship dropped swiftly down towards the Russian vessel floating over the palace.

Within a mile of her the signal, "We bring despatches to the Sultan," flew from the signal staff at the stern. The captain of the Russian scout-ship read the signal and at once telephoned to the palace, with which his ship was connected by an electric thread, for instructions.

The *Ithuriel* then flew a second signal, "If you rise we shall fire," and this he was forced to obey as the Aerian vessel was too far above him for his guns to come into play. He therefore replied with the signal, "I have asked for instructions. Wait for reply." A few minutes later Alan, keeping the Russian well under his guns, saw her drop down to the earth and alight on the flat roof of the palace, on which several figures could be seen moving about and scanning the skies with glasses, which were speedily centred on the *Ithuriel*.

Then a white flag was run up to the top of a flagstaff on one of the minarets of the palace, a similar one was hoisted by the Russian air-ship, and she rose towards the *Ithuriel*. Alan, feeling now sure that the flag of truce would be respected for the Sultan's sake, allowed the ship to come stern on to the *Ithuriel* until the two were within speaking distance.

As she approached, the Russian swung her stern guns out laterally, and Alan did the same with his, so that for the time being neither ship could injure the other. The stern doors were then opened, and the Russian captain delivered a message to the effect that the Sultan had just risen for morning prayers, and would receive the captain of the *Ithuriel* in half an hour. The Aerian vessel could therefore descend without fear.

"There is no question of fear," replied Alan shortly. "I have not come alone. Use your glasses and you will see that the city is surrounded, but we shall respect the truce if you do."

The Russian stepped back with a hurried gesture and seized his glasses. It was now quite light enough for him to see at that elevation a wide circle of points of flashing blue light reflected from the hulls of the Aerian fleet. He put down his glasses and replied—

"So I see! You would not have got here if patrols had been sent out as I advised."

"Or else your patrols would not have come back," said Alan, turning on his heel and walking forward.

Half an hour later the white flag on the minaret was dipped three times as an invitation for the *Ithuriel* to descend, and Alan, determined to guard against any possible treachery on the part of the Russian scout-ship, signalled to it to precede him, and so the two vessels sank down and alighted almost together on the roof of the palace.

The Sultan surrounded by his ministers was awaiting them, and as soon as salutes had been exchanged Alan handed him the ultimatum of the Council. As Khalid read the brief but pregnant message his brows contracted, and an angry flush showed through the bronze of his skin.

He read it twice over, stroking his beard slowly and deliberately as he did so. Then he looked up and said to Alan in a tone from which he made no effort to banish the accents of anger—

"Was not my word enough? Have I not promised that I would make no war for a year? By what right do you order me to compel my friend and ally to leave my city within two hours?"

At the word "ally" Alan's face assumed an expression of wrathful sternness, and he replied—

"By the right which has always governed the issues of war—the power to compel obedience."

"To compel!" cried the Sultan, in a still angrier tone. "What! with one air-ship against twenty? Not even a Prince of the Air could do that."

"No Prince of the Air would be mad enough to make the attempt," replied Alan coldly. "Ask the captain of your

scout-ship, and he will tell you that your city is surrounded; and I can tell you that four hundred guns are trained upon it at this moment, and that the firing of a shot, or the rising of any air-ship but my own from the ground, will be the signal for them all to be discharged. I need not tell your Majesty what the result of that would be."

Khalid recoiled with a cry that was almost one of fear. He knew instinctively that Alan was speaking the literal truth, without the confirmation given by the captain of the scout-ship. He saw, too, that Olga had deceived him, or at any-rate had been grievously mistaken, when she had said that the Aerians would not send a fleet after her squadron. They had done so, and so skilfully had its movements been ordered, that the city had been taken by surprise, and lay at its mercy.

Brave as he was, the strange terrors of the situation sent a thrill of fear through his soul. There he stood, the proudest king on earth, on the roof of his palace, beneath the smiling sky of an Egyptian summer morning; and yet that smiling sky was charged with death and destruction a hundredfold greater than if the thunder-clouds were lowering on it, ready to hurl their lightnings upon the earth.

He could see nothing but the blue heavens and the eastern sunlight shining over the roofs of his capital; and yet he knew that the man standing before him could, with a single signal, reduce the splendid city to heaps of shattered, shapeless ruins, and bury its inhabitants and its guests in one common tomb.

Then what seemed to be a saving thought flashed through his mind, and he said, almost in a tone of banter—

"But in that case we should not die alone, unless you have taught those unsparing guns of yours to distinguish between friend and foe—the signal for our destruction would be the signal for yours as well."

"Even so!" replied Alan gravely. "That is a contingency which I have foreseen. Orloff Lossenski, tell his Majesty what my last orders to the fleet were."

The Russian stepped forward, and after saluting the Sultan said—

"I heard the orders given, Majesty, and they were to that effect. Friends and foes are to be destroyed alike, and nothing is to be left of Alexandria but its ruins.

"I am also charged with a message to my mistress, the Tsarina, which tells her that if she does not leave within two hours her ships will be attacked in the city, and that, too, would be disaster; and if my words have still any weight with her I shall advise compliance with the order of the Council. Will your Majesty permit me to be conducted to my mistress in order that I may deliver my message in due form?"

The Sultan did not seem to hear the request at all. The idea that Alan and his crew should thus deliberately devote themselves and their beautiful vessel to annihilation in the event of their orders being disobeyed appalled and unnerved him. He knew nothing, save by tradition, of the heights of heroism to which men can rise under the stimulus of war, and he looked upon the man who had so calmly pronounced the provisional death sentence of himself and his companions as something more than human, as beings of a higher order, to fight against whom would be impious rashness rather than courage.

It was a situation that would have shaken the nerves of the sternest and most experienced soldier of the nineteenth century, and so it was no wonder that his spirit, unbraced by the discipline of war, shrank from facing its terrors. He saw, too, that there was literally no choice save between submission and destruction. To save, not only the lives of himself and his people, but also those of his guests and allies, he and they must submit and obey this imperious mandate.

"It is the will of God!" he said, bowing his head slightly towards Alan as he spoke. "They who cannot fight must yield. Hereafter we may meet upon more equal terms, and then to-day's humiliation shall not be forgotten."

Alan inclined his head in reply, and said—

"So be it! As your Majesty has seemingly decided to involve the world in the horrors of war, it is not for me to say any more. When the day of battle comes, let the fortune of

war decide between us. Meanwhile, Orloff Lossenski, it is time that you took the Council's message to your mistress."

"Give it to me," said the Sultan, stepping forward with outstretched hands, "and I will take it to her, if she has risen yet."

"There is no need for that," said a voice a few yards beyond Alan. "I am here, and I will take it."

As the sweet, low, even tones, now so hatefully familiar, reached Alan's ears he turned sharply round, with a blaze of ungovernable anger in his eyes, and saw Olga, calm and self-possessed in all the pride of her imperial beauty, walking towards the group from an arched doorway that led up from the interior of the palace.

CHAPTER XIX.

FACE TO FACE AGAIN.

MILING and self-possessed as Olga appeared when she gained the roof of the palace, she had passed through a perfect purgatory of conflicting and agonising emotions since the news of the arrival of the *Ithuriel* had reached her in her room. Her tremendous and, but for the fact of her strange, hopeless love, incomprehensible blunder in setting Alan and Alexis free, instead of either killing them or keeping them in life-long captivity, had already borne terrible fruit; but this visit, made at the very moment when her plans were apparently crowned with success, seemed to threaten nothing less than the complete ruin of all her schemes.

She knew instinctively that the city must be surrounded by an overwhelming force of Aerian ships, for a single one to venture thus into the midst of her own squadron, and, judging by her own tactics, she expected nothing less than immediate annihilation as the alternative to surrender. But even more bitter than this was the thought of meeting, not only as a freeman, but as the commander of the Aerian navy, the man who but a few days ago had been her docile, unresisting slave, robbed of the highest attribute of his manhood by the Circe-spell that she had cast over him, and which she now knew was broken for ever.

And, more than this, she must now meet as an implacable enemy the man whom, in spite of herself, she still loved with

all the passion of her fiery nature, and who, now that he was free again, could but look upon her not only with hatred, but with disgust. This, so far as her own feelings were concerned, was the miserable end of her scheming, but there was no help for it. She had deliberately sown the wind, and now the time was approaching for her to reap the whirlwind.

She thought of her dream in St. Petersburg, and a new and awful meaning was made apparent to her in those few minutes of mental torture before she went to meet her well-beloved enemy face to face. She saw herself mistress of a conquered world, seated on a lonely throne, wailing over her own broken heart in the midst of a desolation that she had brought upon the earth—for nothing.

This, it seemed, was to be the penalty of the unspeakable crime she had committed to gain possession of the air-ship, a hopeless love that should turn all the fruits of conquest, if she ever won them, into the bitter ashes of the Dead Sea apples in her mouth, a love not only unrequited, but repaid with righteous horror and almost divine disgust.

And yet, despite all this, her marvellous fortitude and royal pride came to her aid to help her to bear herself bravely before her enemies, and so, with a smile on her lips and a hell of raging passions in her bosom, she ascended to take her part in the debate, big with the destiny of a world, that was being held on the palace roof.

As Alan turned and confronted her in all the strength and splendour of the manhood that not even her almost super-human arts had been able to tarnish or weaken, and looked at her with the stern, steady gaze without one sign of recognition in the eyes that shone blue-black beneath his straight-drawn brows, her heart stood still and seemed turned to ice in her breast, and for one brief moment her foot faltered and the light died out of her eyes and the colour from her cheeks.

Then she caught the Sultan's gaze turned inquiringly upon her; her indomitable spirit rose to the emergency, and her self-possession returned. Passing Alan by with a slight

inclination of her head which did not conceal the mocking smile which curled her dainty lips, she went to Khalid and, holding out her hand, said in steady, musical tones which, do what he would to resist it, sent a thrill to Alan's heart—

"Where is the message that my faithless servant brings from the tyrants of the world?"

The Sultan gave it to her, and as she read it Lossenski stood silent like the rest, but with head bowed down in shame and sorrow. When she reached the last word of the despatch the crimson deepened on her cheeks and her hands closed convulsively on the paper. Then with a quick movement she tore it in twain, flung the two fragments to the ground, and then, looking up with eyes blazing with passion, she cried—

"I should be a slave to obey! Lossenski, signal to the squadron to rise. Boris, train a gun on that ship and blow her to pieces if a man moves on board of her. Out of the way there, Alan Arnold. If you lift a hand I will shoot you like a dog!"

As she spoke she snatched a pistol out of her belt and had almost levelled it at Alan's heart, when, like a flash of lightning, his rapier leapt from its sheath, and as the pistol came up it was dashed from her hand.

"I could have killed you with less trouble," he said, in quick stern accents, raising the glittering blue blade to a level with her eyes, and keeping it outstretched towards her. "Have you forgotten what I told you, or that I am no longer under your vile spell? If those orders are obeyed I will kill you now, though you do wear a woman's shape. The city is surrounded, and if one vessel rises from the earth, Alexandria will be in ruins in an hour. Now, give the signal for its destruction if you dare, and let the earth be rid of you!"

"And of you, my gallant Knight of the Air, who draws his sword upon a woman!" she almost hissed at him in her fury. "Yes, I dare and I will. Lossenski"—

In another moment the fate of the world would have been changed; but, before the order could be repeated, the Sultan

strode forward and placed himself between Alan and Olga with outstretched arms—

"No, Tsarina! that order shall not be given on my palace or in my hearing. You have forgotten our agreement and my oath. I have sworn on the Koran that there shall be no war between Islam and Aeria for a year, and by the glory of Allah there shall be none!

"What have I and my people done that you should bring this destruction upon them? Your servant shall be shot if he opens his lips, and if you must fight, go into the desert and do it; but that will end our alliance, for you will have broken the peace to which I have sworn, and made me a liar. It is enough! Let us talk like reasonable beings, and not quarrel like children."

Olga was conquered for the time being, and she saw it. Few as had been the moments of the Sultan's speech, they were enough to allow her agile intellect to get the better of her anger, and to convince her that it would have led her to suicide in another minute.

Her manner changed with a swiftness that was almost miraculous. Her long, thick lashes fell, hiding the still burning fires of her eyes. Her attitude changed from one of defiance to one of deference, and as she stepped back a pace or two, she said in a totally altered voice—

"Your Majesty has justly rebuked me. My anger overcame my reason for the moment. My hatred of these tyrants of the air is not a thing of to-day or of yesterday, as you know, but the legacy of generations of wrong and robbery, and the arrogance of this man, who but a few days ago was my slave, and now ventures to dictate terms of war or peace to me, was more than my patience or my temper could bear. I have done wrong, and in atonement I will promise, on the honour of a Romanoff, to be bound absolutely by such engagement as your Majesty may make until the period of your truce is expired."

So saying, she retired to a distant part of the terrace, beckoning Lossenski to follow her. Throwing herself on a

seat in full view but out of earshot of the group she had left, she bade him tell her the story of the loss of the *Vindaya*, and how he came to be the bearer of the message of the Council of Aeria to her.

Lossenski told the story simply and truthfully, and as he finished, the Grand Vizier approached, and after an obeisance, made with Oriental reverence, said—

"Tsarina, my master commands me to inform you that he has settled all matters with the Prince of the Air save one, and to settle that he craves your assistance. Will it please you to come and speak with him?"

"I will come," said Olga, rising and following him with the words of Lossenski fresh in her ears.

"Tsarina Olga," said the Sultan, coming to meet her as she approached the group amidst which Alan was still standing, "I have come to an agreement with Alan Arnold upon all points but one, and that one only you can decide.

"He asserts that six years ago he took you and your brother as guests on board the air-ship, which you now call the *Revenge*, that you drugged the wine drunk by him and his comrades, and, sparing only him and his friend Alexis Masarov, you poisoned the rest of the crew, and threw them out on to the snows of Norway, after which you kept him and Alexis under your influence by means of a drug, which deprived them of their will-power and forced them to reveal the secrets of the air-ship to you and assist you in building your fleet."

"And has your Majesty given credence to such a monstrous story, or do you only wish to hear me give it the contradiction which its absurdity and falsity deserve? If the former, the sooner I and my ships leave your city, never to return save as enemies, the better. If the latter, you shall soon be satisfied."

Olga spoke with an air of angered innocence which completely deceived the Sultan, anxious as he was to find the extraordinary story false, and he hastily replied—

"It is the latter that I desire, of course. I was obliged to

say that if you were unable to deny the accusation it would be impossible for me to continue an alliance with one who had been guilty of a crime which my faith and the customs of my race denounce as vile beyond all human measure. But I refused to believe it against you until your own lips had confessed it, or undeniable evidence had proved it, and therefore I have asked you to come and let us know the truth."

"I thank you, Sultan Khalid, for your confidence and your chivalry," she said, looking up into his eyes with a glance that rendered all denial from her once and for ever unnecessary. "You shall hear me deny the foul falsehood to my traducer's face."

Stung to fresh fury by the knowledge that Alan had sought to expose her in her true nature to the man whom she sought to make her slave in his place, she strode forward to within three paces of where he was standing, and, drawing herself up to the full height of her royal stature, she faced him with pale cheeks and blazing eyes, her beauty so transfigured by anger that the Moslems standing about her instinctively shrank back, awe-stricken by such an incarnation of wrath and loveliness as no man of them had ever dreamed of before. Even Alan himself forgot his hate and disgust for the moment in the contemplation of her almost miraculous beauty and the indescribable dignity with which her anger invested her, and waited in silence that was almost respectful for the tempest of wrath and reproach which he saw was about to be let loose on him.

Her lips trembled mutely for a moment or two before any sound came from them, but when she spoke her tone was low and clear, though almost hoarse with passion, and shaken by the manifest effort she made to keep it under control.

"So this is the return that your chivalry makes for my generosity in giving you life and liberty when you were lost to the world; when I might have killed you, as I see now that I should have done, without a single soul among your people knowing anything of your fate!

"I expected that you would take up arms against me, for your people and mine are enemies to the death; and I knew, too, that the love which I had spurned would not be long in turning to active hate. But you excelled my expectations—you, one of the Princes of the Air, the scion of a race that holds itself above all the other races of the earth, the son of a man who but a few years ago was lord and master of the world! You come in the guise of open and honourable warfare to smirch with your foul lies the fame of a woman for whose sake you made yourself a traitor to your people and a murderer of your own comrades. A pretty story, forsooth, to tell in the ears of my friends and allies. Do you take them for children or fools that you expect them to believe it?

"Imagine such a miracle, your Majesty," she continued, turning, with the clear ring of a mocking laugh in her voice, to the Sultan, "imagine this Alan Arnold, son of the President of Aeria, with his friend and lieutenant, Alexis Masarov, and a crew of eight Aerians on board their flagship, armed with the most tremendous means of destruction ever invented by human genius, and each man of them, moreover, possessing in his own person the power of life and death, as he himself has proved before your own eyes.

"These kings among men invite two casual acquaintances for a trip to the clouds, and these two guests, a youth of twenty and a girl not seventeen, unarmed and without assistance, seize their ship, kill eight of their invincibly armed comrades, and lead the captain and his lieutenant away captive. And how? By means of some mysterious drugs, subtle and irresistible poisons, of which such a boy and girl could not possibly have known either the composition or the use, and which they would have been afraid to employ if they had done.

"But let me come to the facts as they are," she went on, turning again to Alan, who stood literally dumfounded before her, amazed beyond power of thought or speech by the audacity of her words. "It is you who are the liar, the traitor, and the murderer. It is you who killed my brother before my eyes because he sought to protect me from your violence; and it is

you and your friend Alexis who, of your own free will, struck your comrades dead, threw them out of the air-ship upon the Norwegian snows, and then, in the hope of gaining my favour, took the *Ithuriel* to Vorobièvo, near Moscow, and delivered her into the hands of my friends.

"I have fifty men within call at this moment who will swear that this is true. Orloff Lossenski, you are one of them. Were you not at the villa at Vorobièvo when these two came with me in the *Ithuriel* and delivered her into your hands; and did you not find the corpse of my brother Serge in one of the state rooms with his neck bruised and blackened by the grip of his murderer?"

"Yes, Majesty," replied Lossenski, stepping forward as he was addressed. "That is true, though they told us at the time that your brother had been killed in a struggle with their comrades."

"And is it true," continued Olga, "that they accompanied me into your villa and had supper with us as friends, and did not I forgive the death of my brother for the sake of the advantages which the possession of the air-ship, which they consented to surrender to us, would be to the cause of the revolution in Russia to which we were pledged?"

"That is also true, Majesty; and there are several here now with the squadron who can also testify to the fact."

"And also," interrupted Olga, "to the fact that these two traitors worked willingly to help us to secrete the air-ship, and finally to take her to Mount Terror, and there explained the working of her machinery to us and helped us to build other air-ships and submarine vessels, and commanded these in their attacks upon the commerce of our enemies. Is that true, also?"

"It is, Majesty," again replied Lossenski. "Shall I summon the crews of our ships that they also may testify to it lest my word should not be enough?"

"Is it your Majesty's wish that they shall be called?" asked Olga, again turning to the Sultan, who all this time had been standing shifting his gaze from her face to Alan's, and

from Alan's back again to hers, horrified by the fearful accusations with which she had replied to the story, of the falsity of which he was already thoroughly convinced.

"They can be called if Alan Arnold desires it," he said, in grave, deliberate tones. "But would it not be better that he should speak first? At present we have two words against one. Has he any proof that what you say is false?" he continued, looking inquiringly towards Alan.

"I have none but my own word and that of Alexis, up yonder in the skies, and him I cannot—and if I could, under the circumstances, I would not—call," said Alan, who by this time had recovered his self-possession. "If your Majesty proposes to judge between us according to spoken testimony, I say at once that I will accept no such tests, for I well know that this woman could produce a hundred of her accomplices who would swear anything she bade them swear.

"She has given me the lie with equal skill and audacity. I can only give her the lie in return, if not as skilfully, at least as boldly, and with a knowledge that I am telling the truth. Your Majesty can believe her story or mine, as you choose. If you believe hers, I am willing to do you the justice of confessing that you will be judging according to the weight of testimony, such as it is, for that is certainly against me."

"And so I must judge," replied the Sultan coldly. "I cannot believe your story, for it seems to be impossible, while the Tsarina's has every appearance of truth. Into your motives I have neither the right nor the wish to inquire, and all that is left for me to say is that what I have heard has finally decided me to espouse the cause of the Tsarina and her friends against those who have wronged and slandered her, be the cost to me and my people what it may.

"We shall keep the truce if you do, and in the day of strife let the God of Battles decide between us. My answer to your Council's message shall be ready for you in half an hour. Farewell!"

So saying, Khalid the Magnificent turned his back upon Alan, and walked, followed by his Vizier and his ministers, to

the doorway leading to the interior of the palace. Olga, pausing for a moment to cast one glance of triumphant hatred at her discredited foe, beckoned to Lossenski, and followed the Sultan without a word.

Alan, amazed and enraged beyond measure by the unexpected turn that affairs had taken, and yet confident in his own knowledge of the truth, turned on his heel, and went back on board the *Ithuriel*, where he went into his own cabin and sat down to write his directions for enforcing the order of the Council with regard to the evacuation of the city by the Russian squadron.

He bitterly regretted that the orders of the Council did not permit him to destroy the Russian air-ships there and then while they lay at his mercy. But the orders were explicit, and forbade him even to pursue them after they had left Alexandria, unless they committed an act of hostility against him.

If he could have done so, he would have fought them at all hazards, and then, if he had conquered, he would have been able to enforce the general prohibition of the Council against building air-ships upon the Sultan; but as disobedience was not to be thought of, he could only carry out his orders, and hope that the judgment of the Council might prove in the end superior to his own.

At the end of the half-hour he was summoned to meet the Grand Vizier, who brought the reply of his master. This ran as follows:—

In the Name of the Most Merciful God!

Khalid, Commander of the Faithful, to Alan Arnold, President of Aeria.

I have received your message from the hands of your son. I shall faithfully observe the terms of the truce I promised to him, and of which he has told you.

As my city lies for the time being at the mercy of your fleet, I can only save my people and my guests from destruction by agreeing to your demands. The Russian air-ships shall leave Alexandria within an hour of the delivery of this to your son. But this is to tell you that I have made alliance with Olga Romanoff, rightful Tsarina of the Russias, and that when the year of truce has expired, I will no longer be a king merely in name and hold my power and dignity at your pleasure.

At the end of the year of truce there shall be war between you and me and your people and mine unless before then you shall recognise my independence in due form and my right to create such armaments as I think fit for the protection of my dominions against yourself or any other Power, and unless you consent to restore Olga Romanoff to the throne and dignity which is hers by right, and of which your ancestors robbed her in the days of the Terror.

If you do this there shall be peace between us, but if not, there shall be war, and we will fight until the God of Battles has decided between us, and given to you or to me the dominion of the world.

Alan's brows contracted slightly as he read this defiant missive, but there was a half-pitying smile on his lips when he said to the Vizier as he handed him the instructions he had just written—

"I am deeply sorry—sorry for him and his people, and, indeed, for the whole human race—that he has been misled into writing words which in a year's time will set the world in a blaze. Our reply to this will be written in blood and fire, and the smoking ruins of cities throughout the length and breadth of his dominions. But he has chosen, and he and you must abide by his choice. I cannot believe that he knows what he is doing, and if you are a faithful friend and servant you will counsel peace and moderation."

"My master," said the Vizier haughtily, "does not seek advice from his enemies; more than ever would it be impossible for him to do so when their lips are fresh-stained with lies."

Alan's hand instinctively sprang to the hilt of his rapier, and in another moment the Vizier's life would have paid for the insult, but when the blade was half out of its sheath his self-control returned, and he thrust it back again, saying—

"You are an old man and an ambassador, so you are safe. You shall live so that you may some day find out for yourself where the truth in this matter lies. Who knows but that the Syren may before long put you or your master under her spell. If she does you will drink something from her hand, and when you have drunk it you will have no will but hers; you will obey her blindly, and the thoughts that you speak shall be only those she suggests to you."

Later on that day, when the excitement of the hour had

passed, Musa al Ghazi remembered these words, and the strange acquiescence which he had given to Olga's plans in the saloon of the *Revenge*. If he had remembered it while Alan was speaking, millions of innocent lives might possibly have been saved, and the curse of war averted from the world for many more generations, perhaps for ever. But he did not, and so events took their logical course. As it was, he made no direct reply to Alan's words, but handed him another paper, saying—

"I have been commissioned also to give you this. The instructions agreed upon shall be obeyed, and now I have only to remind you that you are no longer my master's guest."

With that he saluted with frigid dignity and turned away towards the palace door.

Alan looked after him for a moment with a smile half of contempt and half of pity, then he opened the paper in his hand. As he expected, it was from Olga, and, beginning without any form of address, it ran thus—

I shall obey your orders and leave the city, not because I will, but because I must, in order to save the Sultan and his people from destruction. I will also undertake to refrain from hostilities until the Sultan's truce expires, provided you do not molest me. If you do, or if the Sultan is subjected to any unreasonable commands or acts of oppression, I will consider the truce at an end, and I will not only recommence my submarine attacks upon the world's commerce, but I will send out my air-ships and scatter death and destruction far and wide over the earth, without mercy and without discrimination between enemies or neutrals; it is therefore for you to choose whether the issue between us shall be fought out when the time comes, and in fair and honourable warfare, or whether the dogs of war shall be let loose at once. I have still thirty air-ships, and as many submarine cruisers, and I can do what I say.

OLGA ROMANOFF.

"No doubt," said Alan to himself. "I'm afraid we shall have to accept your terms. I didn't think that even you would be capable of such a colossal crime as that; but now I know something like the full capacity of your wickedness, and if you threaten it you will do it.

"With those thirty ships, if you have as many as that, and I suppose you must have twenty-four or twenty-five at least, you could wreck half the great cities of the world in six

months, and we could do little or nothing to stop you. We have only eleven ships equal in speed to yours, and most of those must be kept in call of Aeria.

"I would give my life and my ship willingly for permission to fight it out here and now, and yet, after all, that would be frightful cruelty and injustice to the unoffending thousands who would lose their lives by the destruction of the city, so I suppose it must be peace for a year, and then—ah, what then?"

His soliloquy began on the terrace and ended on the deck of the *Ithuriel*. He gave the order to rise into the air, and the aerial cruiser soared slowly upwards, still flying the flag of truce as a signal to her consorts that the mission had been successfully accomplished. As he felt certain that the Sultan would carry out the directions agreed upon to the letter, he left the city without any misgivings, and in a few minutes the *Ithuriel* was floating alongside her consort the *Isma*, and Alan and Alexis had clasped hands once more.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CALL TO ARMS.

WITHIN an hour the wondering inhabitants of Alexandria saw the Russian fleet rise a thousand feet into the air and form in two columns of line ahead. Then the Aerian fleet ranged itself in two long lines five hundred feet outside them and a thousand feet above them. A time-shell from the *Ithuriel* gave the signal to start, and the two fleets leapt forward to the south-east at a speed of a hundred miles an hour, and in a few minutes had vanished over the desert. The speed was quickly increased to two hundred miles, and so they sped on all day and through the next night—the Russian ships being forced to show their lights while the Aerians remained in darkness—until, when morning dawned and Olga and her captains looked for Alan's fleet they found that it had vanished, and that they were floating alone over the solitudes of the Southern Ocean.

They had been escorted like offending school children out of harm's way, and then left to their own devices. It was a bitterly humiliating ending to an expedition which had really produced such important results, but there was no possibility of present revenge, and so Olga gave the order to proceed straight to Mount Terror, intending to begin there and then the working out of her part of the compact that she had made with the Sultan.

This arrangement was briefly to the following effect:—Olga placed at Khalid's disposal all the necessary plans for the con-

struction of both air-ships and submarine vessels, and also supplied members of her own immediate retinue, well skilled in the work, to supervise the building, which was, of course, to be carried out with the utmost secrecy and speed, so as to guard, as far as practicable, against the possible destruction of the factories and dockyards by the Aerians.

The Sultan had engaged to find money and material for building a thousand air-ships, and the same number of submarine cruisers, within the year, and these were to be supplied with motive power at conversion-stations established at the dockyards under the exclusive control of certain of Olga's lieutenants.

The secret of this motive power, which was identical save for slight differences in the process of conversion with that possessed by the Aerians—that is to say, electrical energy derived directly from atomised carbon and vaporised petroleum—was retained in her own keeping by Olga, who had simply promised that an unlimited supply of it should be forthcoming as it was wanted.

She had insisted on a strict engagement that no one not authorised by her should even approach the conversion-stations, and she had given the Sultan and his ministers distinctly to understand that any attempt to discover the secret of the process would terminate the alliance, and expose the cities of the Moslem empire to destruction.

At the expiration of the year of truce, the Sultan's army and navy, supported by the immense aerial fleet that would then be in existence, was to be in complete readiness for any emergencies. Olga was to be proclaimed Tsarina in Moscow, and the House of Romanoff formally restored in her person. If any portions of Russia refused to receive her, they were to be terrorised into submission by the air-ships.

The tribesmen of Western and Central Asia were to be armed as rapidly as possible, so as to be ready to form a reserve force for compelling the submission of the Russians if they resisted the new order of things, and to participate in the invasion of Europe, which was to take place at several points as soon as

the Holy War of Islam was proclaimed, and Cross and Crescent once more confronted each other on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, too, the resources of the dockyard at Mount Terror were to be strained to the utmost, and the conspiracy in Russia for the restoration of Olga to the throne of the Romanoffs was to be developed by every means that money could purchase or skill devise.

The scheme of defence arranged by the Council of Aeria had already been completed, and it was to execute this that the Aerian fleet had left the Russian squadron during the night. Indeed, the Russians had been travelling southward alone for more than eight hours before they had discovered the fact. As soon as it became impossible for them to see the Aerian vessels these had stopped, in accordance with a prearranged plan, and had wheeled round and steered for London across the African continent at a height of about ten thousand feet.

Flying at the full speed of the smaller vessels, a twenty-hour flight carried the fleet over the eight thousand miles which separated its starting-point from the capital of the world, and about six o'clock in the evening of the 21st of May the fifty-two vessels, flying the Aerian and British flags, appeared in the air over the open space which is now called Hyde Park, and, to the amazement of the astonished citizens, dropped quietly to the earth and lay open to the unrestricted inspection of the thousands who speedily gathered in the park to avail themselves of the unwonted spectacle, and to learn, if possible, the reason of the unexpected visit.

No attempt was made by the crews of the ships to prevent the sightseers from seeing all they could of the exteriors of the vessels, which were arranged on the sward in two long lines, so that they could walk down between them and admire their beautiful shape and wonderful construction at their leisure. A sentry was stationed by each vessel to warn the sightseers not to approach too close to the wings and propellers, and that was the only precaution taken.

Alan learnt soon after landing that King Albert the Second, the fourth in descent from Edward VII., who was King during

the War of the Terror, was at Windsor, and that the House of Commons and the Senate, which for over a hundred years had filled the place of the old House of Lords, had dissolved for the spring recess, and would not meet again until after the General Election, which was held every 1st of June.

He therefore caused a message to be sent to His Majesty at Windsor, requesting him to name a time for an interview on the following day, and then, sufficient watches having been set on all the vessels, he and Alexis, with the majority of the crews, took a few hours' leave, not a little glad of the opportunity of stretching their legs on *terra firma*, after their three days' confinement to the air-ships.

The reply which he received from the King fixed eleven o'clock in the morning of the 22nd as the time of the interview for which he had asked, and, just as the castle clock was beginning to sound the strokes of the hour, the *Ithuriel* swept up out of the distance towards Windsor Castle, and, after hovering for a moment in mid-air, sank quietly down until she rested on that portion of the terrace which overlooks the Home Park. Her arrival had been announced to the King as soon as she hove in sight, and he was on the terrace ready to receive his visitors when she alighted.

Albert II., King of England, Emperor of Britain, and President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, was a monarch only in name. Nothing but the trappings of sovereignty remained to himself or his station, and he would not even have retained these had it not been for the fact that, during its hundred years of actual rule, the Supreme Council had insisted upon the maintenance of the monarchical principle in those countries where it had obtained at the end of the nineteenth century.

The first formal greetings over, the King caused Alan to be escorted to his private apartments in the castle, and as soon as they were alone together in the room which he reserved for his own special use, he motioned Alan to a seat and, throwing himself back upon a lounge with an air of weariness which accorded but ill with the hour of the day, he said in a somewhat querulous tone—

"We are quite alone now and you can speak with perfect freedom. I am sure it must be important business that has brought you here with a whole fleet of your air-ships, and I shall be glad if you will tell me at once what it is. I hope nothing has occurred to imperil our peace and safety?"

"On the contrary, your Majesty," replied Alan. "I regret to say that my errand is to tell you that, not only is that the case, but that it is a practical certainty that within twelve months from now the whole world will be plunged into war."

"What! what!" exclaimed the King, jerking himself up to a sitting posture. "Surely you don't mean that? I thought that no war would be possible without the permission of your Council. Surely you would not allow the nations of the world to go to war with each other again, and repeat all the horrors that happened a hundred and thirty years ago?"

"Your Majesty forgets that when we renounced the control of the world six years ago we gave back to the nations the right of making war upon each other, although we hardly believed that they would be foolish enough and wicked enough to exercise it. That, however, is beside the question, because war is now inevitable, and, what is even more important, the Council of Aeria is unhappily powerless to prevent it."

"Eh! what is that?" exclaimed the King, this time rising to his feet and facing Alan with an air of petulant reproach. "Powerless to prevent it? You, with all your fleets of air-ships and submarine vessels? You, who have called yourselves the masters of the world for nearly a century and a half—you cannot stop war?"

"We cannot do so, your Majesty," said Alan, also rising to his feet, "simply because I regret to say that we no longer possess the undisputed empire of the air, and therefore, in a measure at least, we have lost the command of the world.

"As for the responsibility which your words impute to us, I must tell you at once that it does not exist. The rulers of the world, and yourself among them, voluntarily and with full knowledge accepted perfect freedom, and therefore the individual responsibility that is inseparable from it. You knew that from

the time we resigned the world-throne you were free to make war upon each other, on land and by sea.

"It is your fault and not ours that you are now so defenceless that you have cause to fear the war against which you ask us to protect you. You have known for nearly four years that the Sultan of Islam has been creating armies and fleets, and diligently training millions of his subjects in that art of war which we hoped was to be forgotten for ever among men.

"Did you suppose, you Kings and Princes of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, that Khalid the Magnificent, a man of boundless ambition, was creating these armies and fleets simply to play with them? Could you not see that nothing but some dream of world-wide conquest could be inspiring him to do this, and do you need to be told that the realms of Christendom offered him the only possible area of conquest in the world?

"What have you done to defend yourselves, or to prepare against a possible day of battle? You have done nothing. Saving your international police, now little more than an ornamental body of officials, the Federation does not possess a single soldier. You have seen the Sultan building battleships and arming them with the deadliest weapons that skill and science could devise, and you, with all your wealth, and skill, and knowledge, have not built a single vessel that would be of use in time of war.

"I understand that the Council has warned you again and again that the Sultan's designs could not have been peaceable, and yet your Parliaments have not voted a single pound for the defence of your homes and your riches."

"Ah, yes!" broke in the King, now in an apologetic tone, for he was completely cowed by the direct, earnest force of Alan's reproving words. "That is it! You must not blame myself or my fellow-monarchs, you must blame the Parliaments. We can do nothing without them; they have usurped all the power that formerly belonged to Kings. It is this democracy that has weakened us and left us defenceless. Every man thinks himself a ruler, and so there are no rulers, except in name. Every man has a vote, therefore every man must be

consulted about everything, and so nothing can be done but what the multitude wishes. They want only riches, splendid buildings and cities, light work, and comfortable lives. That is all they have cared about, and so that is all they have got. If we, their Kings and duly appointed rulers, could have done as we wished to do affairs would have been very different; but it is impossible to rule where every man fancies himself a king!"

"That is but a poor excuse, King Albert," replied Alan sternly and yet somewhat sadly. "It is the old story of Greece and Rome and Byzantium over again. The weakness of the rulers has been the strength of the demagogues, and that has always spelt national decay from the days of Cleon until now.

"I might ask you how it comes that Sultan Khalid has been able to keep his millions of subjects in hand and to be to-day the sole actual ruler of the greatest empire the world has ever seen; but neither you nor I have any more time to waste, either in reproaching each other or regretting what cannot now be helped."

"No, no!" said the King, almost appealingly. "That is quite right—quite right. Tell me, if you please, what has really happened to bring about this terrible danger which threatens us, and let us see if we cannot yet protect ourselves."

"You can yet make such preparations as will at least enable you to meet your enemies on equal terms," replied Alan, following the King's example, and seating himself again, "and it is to put before you a necessary scheme of defence that I have come here, and when I have described it you will see that we Aerians have not forgotten that our ancestors once led Anglo-Saxondom to the conquest of the world."

"Pray proceed," said the King, sitting up on his lounge again. "I can assure you that I am all attention."

Alan then began, and told in detail all that was necessary for the King to know of what had happened during the last six years, concluding with a graphic narrative of startling vividness of the marvellous and momentous events that had been crowded so thickly into the last twenty-one days.

It would not be saying too much to state that the close of the recital, which he had listened to with the most anxious attention, left King Albert in a state of nervous excitement that bordered closely upon absolute panic. He had heard enough to show him that the splendid fabric of Anglo-Saxon civilisation would, if left in its present defenceless state, totter and fall like a house of cards at the first onslaught of its powerful and disciplined enemies.

He saw that its wealth and splendour, like those of the effete empires of old, were a source of weakness and not of strength, a temptation to its foes and an encumbrance to itself.

Then, as Alan went on to describe the scheme of defence proposed by the Council of Aeria, he seemed to find support and consolation in the quiet, masterful tones of the man who, without a tremor in his voice, could calmly discuss the prospect of a war which would involve the whole of humanity in one colossal struggle, which could have no other result than an indescribably appalling loss of human life and the complete subjection, if not destruction, of those who were vanquished in it.

Yet when he had finished King Albert shook his head sadly and doubtfully, and said—

"Yes, yes, it is a splendid scheme, a scheme worthy of you and your wonderful race, but it can only be accomplished if our Parliaments agree together to sanction it and support it. I hope with all my heart that they will do so, but I sadly fear that not even your influence, and the fearful danger which threatens them, will make them agree one with another.

"Of late years, since the power of the democracy has increased so enormously, they wrangle for weeks over the smallest matters of municipal government. As for national policy, they seem to have forgotten what it means. I may be wrong, and with all my soul I hope I am, but I sadly fear they will never consent to what they will call a military despotism, even to save themselves. The elections take place during the last four days of this month, and by that time the news that you have brought me shall be published everywhere, so that

the people may know what is before them, but everything will depend upon the men and women whom they return to Parliament."

"Ah," interrupted Alan, stroking his beard to conceal a smile, "I had forgotten for the moment. You have lady legislators now as well as male ones. We were ungallant enough to refuse them admittance to the Parliament during our period of control."

"Yes," said the King, with a smile that had but little mirth in it. "But we have progressed fast since then. In our Parliament men and women were almost equally balanced in both Chambers, and scarcely any business was done during the year."

"Which proves," said Alan, "that what was called our discourtesy and unfairness was not so very unwise after all."

The interview ended shortly after this remark, for the time for action had already arrived. Alan had learnt enough from the King's own lips to see that he was merely a crowned puppet in the hands of the rival parties, which contended in both Chambers for the favour of the democracy and the continuance of office. He therefore saw further that, if anything was to be done in working out the scheme of international defence, he would have to take the initiative.

As full discretion had been given to him in his commission from the Council of Aeria, he did not scruple to half-persuade and half-frighten the King into investing him with such authority as he could give, and, armed with this, he went to work that very day with a vigour and promptness which amazed the feeble monarch, and raised a storm of indignation among the members of the two Chambers who were seeking re-election.

A very short experience of these people proved to him that nothing must be hoped from them. Day after day he met committees and deputations of them, who argued with him and wrangled among themselves until he was utterly disgusted and out of patience with them.

At last, on the evening of the 27th, after he had spent the

whole day in striving to convince a joint-committee, consisting of twenty members of each Chamber, of the tremendous danger which threatened the Federation, and the immediate and urgent necessity of united action in preparing to meet it, he lost the last remnants of his temper, and, springing to his feet, he faced them with anger in his eyes and scorn on his lips, and said—

"We have talked enough, ladies and gentlemen! I came here expecting to find the old spirit of Anglo-Saxondom still alive, and so far as you are concerned I find it dead. You are not patriots or competent rulers. You are simply members of a noisy and verbose debating society! When absolute destruction at the hands of a well-armed and implacable foe is threatening your country and your allies, you talk of averting the calamity by discussion and arbitration, instead of armed resistance. By all means discuss and arbitrate, if you can, but also prepare for battle in case it proves, as I am certain it will prove, to be inevitable. Do you suppose that the lamb can argue with the wolf, or that the rich and defenceless man can save his wealth from the armed plunderer by mere force of argument or an appeal to his moral sense? If you do, you are something worse than simple, you are guilty of a folly which is a crime against those who have committed their affairs to your keeping.

"But I, like most of my people, have Anglo-Saxon blood in my veins, and I will not leave my kindred defenceless. I bear an English name, and that name and my descent shall be my title to do what I now tell you I am going to do. In my own person, and with the full authority and sanction of the Council of Aeria and your own lawful monarch, I here and now reassert the supremacy over the realms of Anglo-Saxondom which my father resigned in St. Paul's Cathedral six years and a half ago! Hold your elections if you choose, and conduct your noisy pretence at government according to your own tastes, but do not expect me to be guided or bound by any enactments that you may choose to make. You may call this a revolution if you will. So it is, but remember that your foolishness has made

it necessary! I can make Anglo-Saxondom ready to meet its enemies on equal terms when the day of battle comes, as come it surely will in less than twelve months from now, and, God helping me, I will do it! You either cannot or will not do this, but I will take good care that you do not prevent it being done.

"I believe that the old spirit which won the Armageddon of 1904 still survives in Anglo-Saxon breasts, and I believe that it will respond to the call to arms which shall be heard throughout the length and breadth of the Federation before another sun has set. To-morrow I shall take possession of the means of intercommunication, and I warn you that you will oppose me at your peril.

"You know that I have a force at command before which you are as helpless as the worms that crawl in the earth, and as there is a heaven above me I will use it without ruth or scruple if I see that the interests of Anglo-Saxondom require me to do so. You have your choice, to act with me or to remain neutral. Oppose me, and I will destroy you as traitors and enemies to your country and your race!"

So saying, Alan turned his back upon the committees, and strode out of the room in which he had met them, leaving them speechless with anger and dismay.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOME-COMING.

HE eastern mountains were still casting their long shadows over the lawns and fields, the vineyards and the gardens of Aeria on the morning of the eleventh of May in the year 2037 of the Christian Era and the hundred and thirty-third year of the Peace, but the whole population of the lovely valley were already afoot and abroad, for this was the most momentous day that had been in the history of the colony since Richard Arnold had first crossed the Northern Ridge with Natasha beside him in the conning-tower of the little *Ariel*, in those days the only air-ship that existed in the world, to lay the foundations of that throne from which their descendants had ruled the nations of the earth for a century and a quarter.

To-day the year of probation imposed by the Council upon Alan Arnoldson and his companion in misfortune, in exile, and in victory, was to expire, and the long-lost wanderers were to return to their home and kindred.

Very soon after it became light hundreds of aerial boats and yachts of every variety of design and ornamentation that the taste and skill of the most highly-cultivated race of people the world had ever seen could devise, came floating in towards the vast city of Aeria from the marble palaces and villas which were scattered throughout the length and breadth of the central African Paradise.

Along the broad, smooth white roads, too, which led from

the southern portions of the valley, round the lake to the northern shore on which the city stood, groups of people, with here and there husbands and wives and pairs of yet unwedded lovers, were gliding in long, swift, easy curves on noiseless wheel-skates over the polished marble of the pavements.

Bright with the gayest and yet most perfectly-harmonised colours, blazing with jewels and precious metals, from their gold or crystal-winged coronets to the burnished silver framework of their skates, splendid in stature, and glowing with perfect health—if some man of the present day could have beheld these dwellers in Aeria on their way to hold high festival in their capital, he would have thought that he had strayed into some other and higher sphere, inhabited by some glorified race of beings who had left the toils and cares and pollutions of earth far behind them on some lower plane of existence.

Doubtless, indeed, from some such sphere the reincarnated spirits of those who, a hundred and thirty-three years before, had passed through the tremendous ordeal of the Terror, and in their hour of well-won triumph had made such a splendid future possible for their descendants, looked down with approving eyes, not undarkened by a shade of sorrow for woes to come, upon this glorious scene of the fruition of the harvest that they had sown, this realisation of the long-sought ideal of human brotherhood, where there was no evil because men had learnt at last that good was better than evil.

Vast as was the stately city, which was at once the capital and the only town of Aeria, it was soon comfortably filled by the brilliant throngs of visitors that came pouring into it by road and through the air. The broad white streets, lined with their double groves of palms and tree-ferns, soon blazed with colour, and became vocal with greetings and laughter, and all the houses which lined them were thrown open to all visitors who chose to come and claim hospitality for the day of rejoicing.

On the terrace in front of her father's villa, on the slopes that rose to the west of the city, Alma stood with Isma watch-

ing the brilliant scene below and around them, and speculating on the coming events of the day which for them had a supreme interest, such as no other inhabitant of the valley could feel.

"It will be a right royal home-coming for our two heroes, won't it, Alma?" said Isma, slipping her little hand through her friend's arm; "almost worthy of the great deeds that they have done to regain what will be given back to them to-day—and yet, alas! there is to be a spot on the sun of happiness for all that. Alma, are you still quite sure that poor Alan will have to come back and not find that which above all other things he comes to seek?"

A faint flush rose to Alma's cheeks as she replied, in a low, steady tone—

"Yes, Isma, alas! as you say, I am still sure of that, supposing always that he really does come to seek what you mean. I know that no man ever lived more worthy the love of woman than he is. Yet, God help me, I cannot give mine.

"I know, too, that he will come back to-day crowned with more honour than any Aerian, save Alexis, ever won before him since the days of our ancestors—and yet whenever I permit myself even to dream of him as a lover, a dark, beautiful, cruel face looks with black, burning eyes into mine, and two sweet, scornfully-smiling lips say in a whisper that sounds almost like a serpent's hiss—'You may take him now, for I have done with him. Take him and ask him to tell you how well he and I loved when my spell was strong upon him and he forgot both you and all his kindred for sake of me.'

"It is horrible, horrible beyond all thought or speech, but it is so, Isma, and I, of all the thousands of Aeria who will make merry to-day, shall be sad at heart and praying for the night to come."

"I don't believe it, Alma, however sincerely you may do so—as, of course, you do," replied Isma impatiently. "It is not your true and loving self that is speaking. It is the woman who has been brooding over a shattered idol that never really was a man of flesh and blood.

"I tell you again—and before that sun has set you will con-

fess in your own heart that I am right—that you have never known the Alan who is coming home to-day any more than I have known the Alexis who is coming home with him. Neither you nor I have ever seen two such men as they will be—men who have passed through such experiences as no other Aerians ever had, who have suffered and conquered, dared and done, like them.

"You must put away those morbid fancies of yours, dearest; they are not worthy of you any more than Olga Romanoff is worthy to cause you an hour's unhappiness. Never mind thinking about Alan as a lover now. I tell you you have never seen him, therefore it will be time enough for you to begin to do that when you do see him.

"For my own part, I don't mind telling you—of course, strictly between ourselves—that though I can hardly say that I love Alexis as he is now, since I do not know what he is like, I am quite prepared to fall in love with him all over again on the slightest provocation. And now, after that confession, I think we had better close the discussion and get ready to go over to the city."

This frank avowal, uttered as it was with a delightful candour quite irresistible in its charm, brought a smile to Alma's lips in spite of her own sombre thoughts. She slipped her arm round Isma's waist, and led her towards one of the long windows which opened out on to the terrace under the pillared portico which ran the whole length of the front of the villa.

"I quite agree with you," she said. "If that tell-tale face of yours is no better masked than it is now, when you meet your Alexis I don't think you will have long to wait for the provocation. Ah, well, I suppose—in fact, I am sure—that you take by far the wiser view, and I would give anything to be able to look upon Alan as you are ready to do on Alexis.

"But no, it's no use; do what I will I cannot think of him apart from that Syren who has held him in the bondage of her spells all these years. I know it is unreasonable, and yet

he seems, even now that he has regained his freedom, to belong to her more than he ever did to me."

"That, my dear Alma," replied Isma, half seriously and half in jest, "is as nearly absurd as anything that such a serious and cultivated person as yourself could say. If I could give you a share of my more trivial temperament you would just say that you are still so desperately jealous of Olga Romanoff that you cannot bring yourself to think of Alan as a possible lover until you feel quite sure that he hates her as intensely as you do. That may not be a very heroic way of putting it, but I think we shall find it pretty near the truth before you have known the new Alan very long."

Alma laughed more musically than mirthfully at this sally, but made no reply to it in words. There was, perhaps, more truth in the half-bantering, half-reproachful words than she would have cared to admit, even to her best-beloved and most confidential friend, and so she took a wise refuge in silence, from which Isma, in the gladness of her own heart, drew her own conclusions.

It might have been that there were depths in Alma's nature which not even their life-long friendship and their common sorrow had enabled her to fathom, but for the present she was quite satisfied that jealousy of Olga and anger at the advantage which Alma believed her to have taken of her power were the sole reasons that prevented her from regarding Alan as she had confessed herself ready and willing to regard Alexis.

When they left the terrace the two girls had breakfast together in Alma's own room in a privacy which the other members of the family tacitly respected, knowing as they did that the events of the day would bear a totally different significance for them to that which they would have for all the other inhabitants of the valley.

By the time the sun began to show his disc above the ridges of the eastern mountains they were on their way to the city with Alma's mother and father in one of the aerial boats that were used for transit about the interior of the valley.

They alighted on the flat roof of the President's official residence, a splendid palace of the purest white marble, which stood on the northern side of the great square, from the centre of which rose the golden-domed building which served the Aerians as a meeting-place on all public occasions. It was here that the decrees of the Council were promulgated, and here, too, on every seventh day were held the simply impressive religious services prescribed by the Aerian form of worship.

Soon after they had arrived at the President's house a great mellow-toned bell sounded the hour of six from the cupola above the dome, and, as the last stroke died away, a chorus of silvery chimes rose up from a hundred towers in different parts of the city, and went floating across the lake and down the valley to the southward, caught up and echoed as it went by peals from the thousand palaces and villas scattered about the lower slopes of the mountains.

This was the signal for the commencement of the first ceremony of the day, and the gaily-dressed, smiling throngs of visitors to the city began to file in orderly, leisurely fashion into the eight wide-open doors which led to the interior of the vast temple in the middle of the central square.

In the midst of the immense open area under the dome was a space about twenty feet square, enclosed by low railings of massive gold, and in this stood three tall pillars of marble without a single flaw or vein to mar their perfect whiteness from base to capital. On each of them stood an urn of exquisite shape, each carved out of a solid block of crystal, and each containing a small quantity of ashes.

Each pillar bore an inscription in letters of gold let into the marble. The centre one was slightly higher than the other two, and its inscription consisted of the single word

"NATAS."

The urns on the other two pillars contained a larger quantity of ashes. On the pillar to the right hand, facing the main entrance to the temple, were the words—

RICHARD ARNOLD,
First Conqueror of the Air.

NATASHA,
The Angel of the Revolution.

And on that to the left—

ALAN TREMAYNE,
First President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation.

MURIEL TREMAYNE,
His Wife.

The square in which these pillars stood was the most sacred spot on all the earth in the eyes of the Aerians, sanctified as it was by the ashes of those who had made possible the Great Deliverance, and brought peace on earth after countless ages of strife. Every tongue was silent, and every head was bowed in reverence as those who entered the temple first caught sight of the pillars and their priceless burdens.

Then the vast and ever-swelling congregation ranged itself in orderly files, all fronting towards an elevated rostrum which stood at one of the angles of the great square under the dome, formed by the junction of the four naves, with their long pillared aisles which ran towards the four points of the compass.

Suddenly all the carillons that were still ringing out over the city ceased, and in the midst of the perfect silence the President ascended the rostrum to address the expectant assembly. Although he spoke but a little above his ordinary tone, every word could be heard with perfect distinctness throughout the immense interior of the building, for a system of electric transmitters, a development of the modern telephone, carried his voice simultaneously to a hundred parts of the walls, so that those who were standing farthest from him heard quite as distinctly as those who were close to the rostrum.

He began by a brief narration of all that had happened to Aeria and the world since the fatal day on which Olga

Romanoff had set foot on the deck of the *Ithuriel* to the present moment, and made no attempt to conceal or to minimise the tremendous and disastrous consequences that had flowed from that fatal and yet innocent mistake on the part of his son.

He confessed that the empire of the air, that priceless legacy which they had received from its first conqueror, had been lost, and that, not only the outside nations of the earth, but even Aeria itself stood upon the eve of a conflict in comparison with which even the War of the Terror itself would prove almost insignificant. All that had been won then had now to be fought for over again, and fought for with weapons the destructiveness of which made impossible any estimate of the carnage and desolation that were about to burst upon the world.

Then he described how Alan and Alexis, acting under the orders of the Council, had, after vainly trying to arouse the rulers and senates of Anglo-Saxondom to a sense of their danger and responsibility, proclaimed martial law throughout the whole area of the Federation, reasserted the supremacy which the Council had resigned nearly seven years before, and taken the direct conduct of affairs into their own hands.

He told how the manhood of Europe, America, Southern Africa, and Australia had, under the influence of their appeals, roused itself from the sloth of prosperity and the vain dreams of democracy, and under their leadership had mustered millions upon millions strong to oppose those who determined to rivet the chains of despotism once more upon the limbs of free men.

The energy and devotion of the two men whose exile was to end that day had accomplished this miracle in less than a twelvemonth. All the mechanical resources of the Federation had been simultaneously devoted to the building of an aerial navy, which already numbered nearly a thousand vessels, and more than a hundred dockyards had achieved the construction of a navy of over a thousand submarine warships, while millions of small-arms had been sent out from Aeria, or

manufactured in the arsenals of the Federation for the equipment of the newly-created armies.

What the issue would be of the mighty struggle which would begin in six days, no man could tell, but all that could be done to give the victory to Aeria and the Federation had been done, and the rest lay in the hands of the God of Battles, who had given their ancestors the victory in the days of the Terror. The President concluded his address by saying—

"Those through whom, if not by whom, this calamity has undoubtedly fallen upon the world, have been recalled to Aeria by the Council, after nearly seven years of exile, to receive reinstatement in their long-forfeited rights of citizenship, but even now they will not reassume those rights unless their welcome home is unanimous. Therefore, while their ships are still outside our mountains, if any citizen of Aeria has, even at this eleventh hour, any reason to give why they should not be permitted to recross the barriers which separate us from the rest of the world, let him or her come forward now and state it."

He ceased, and for a few moments there was perfect silence throughout the vast congregation. Not a man or woman moved or spoke, and all eyes were turned on the President, waiting for him to speak again. In a voice whose now unrestrained emotion contrasted strongly with the former impassiveness of his tones he said—

"Then their welcome shall be unmarred by any voice of dissent! As the father of one of the exiles I thank you for endorsing the sanction which, as President of the Council, I have believed it my duty to give to the return of my son Alan and his friend and companion, Alexis Masarov, who fell with him and with him has risen again."

Hardly had the last word left his lips when salvo after salvo of aerial artillery roared out from mid-air all round the mountains, and came echoing down the upper gorges and ravines to tell the people of Aeria that the fleet which had been sent out to escort the returning exiles was already in sight.

So spacious were the approaches to the vast building that in less than ten minutes from the time the President had left the rostrum on hearing the salutes from the sky not a soul remained within its precincts.

Outside the Council Hall the scene was such as to baffle all attempts at adequate description. Hundreds of aerial craft, fashioned in every conceivable variety of design that the educated fancy of their owners could suggest, soared up from various parts of the city and its environs, and made towards the Ridge to the north of the valley.

The summit was about four thousand feet above the slope on which the city stood, and it was quite within the capacity of the pleasure-craft to scale this height. So their glittering wings beat the cool, fresh air of the morning with rapid strokes, and the whole flotilla of them soared upwards until their occupants were able to see over the mighty rock-wall, and the illimitable landscape beyond opened out before their expectant gaze.

The President, the Vice-President, and the twelve members of the Council with their families had embarked on one of the new aerial battleships, two hundred and fifty of which had been constructed during the past year. The *Avenger*, as she had been named, in view of the fact that she was henceforth to be placed under Alan's immediate command as flagship of the combined Aerian and Federation fleets, was the largest aerial cruiser then in existence, and embodied the highest structural skill to which the engineers of Aeria had attained.

From the stern to the point of her ram she was two hundred and seventy-five feet in length, with a midships beam of thirty feet. She was sustained in the air on two pairs of wings, one working under the other. Of these, the lower and larger pair measured two hundred feet from point to point and fifty feet in their greatest breadth, while the upper pair, working nearly flush with the deck, were two-thirds of their size.

She carried ten guns on each broadside, and two bow and two stern chasers of a range limited only by the possibility of taking aim at the object to be destroyed, and her propellers

were capable of driving her through the air at the hitherto unheard-of speed of six hundred miles an hour.[1]

The *Avenger*, attended by an escort of fifty cruisers of somewhat smaller dimensions than her own, rapidly out-distanced the flotilla of pleasure-craft, and passing over the Ridge at a speed of sixty miles an hour, stopped at an elevation of a thousand feet above it.

From here those on her deck could see the vast oval of the valley encircled by the sentinel ships which now constantly patrolled the mountain bulwarks of Aeria, and which were launching hundreds of time-shells up into the air from their outer broadsides and producing a continuous roar of explosions which formed such a greeting salute as had never been heard on earth or in the air before.

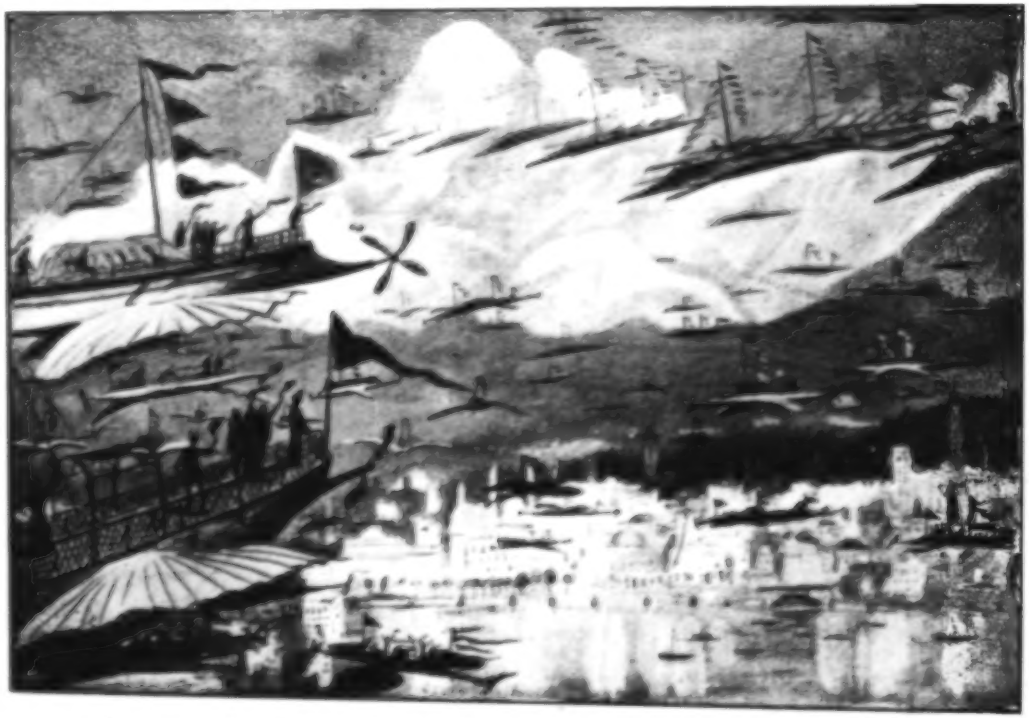
Presently an answering roll of thunder was heard far away to the north, growing every moment louder and louder.

"There they come at last!" cried Isma, who was standing with Alma in the bow of the *Avenger*, eagerly scanning the northern heavens through a pair of field-glasses. "I can see the flashes of the shells quite distinctly."

As she spoke she handed the glasses to Alma, and noticed, not without a little smile of satisfaction, that her hands trembled slightly as she raised them to her eyes.

"Yes, they are coming," said Alma, in a tone that might have been a good deal steadier than it was. "I can see the sun shining upon the hulls of the ships. They are coming up very fast, evidently."

[1] Those readers who may be inclined to think this speed extravagant or impossible are requested to remember that the most recent experiments in aerodynamics have proved that the higher the speed of an aerial machine the less is the power required to support and propel it, or, to quote the words of Professor Langley, of the Smithsonian Institute, "One horse-power will transport a larger weight at twenty miles an hour than at ten, a still larger at forty miles an hour than at twenty, and so on with increasing economy of power with each higher speed up to some remote limit not yet attained in experiment." Granted therefore the practically illimitable energy of the motive power supposed to be at the command of the Aerians, there is no reason why a ship of the dimensions of the *Avenger* should not be propelled at the enormous speed mentioned in the text.



THE COMBINED SQUADRONS SWEPT ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN BARRIER.

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"Of course they are!" laughed Isma. "After the poor fellows have been shut out all this time from the delights of Aeria, it is only natural that they should hasten their home-coming. Look, look! you can see them without the glasses now. What a swarm of them there seems to be!"

As she spoke an immense fleet, numbering nearly five hundred vessels spread out in the form of a vast crescent, the arc of which was turned towards Aeria, swept up out of the blue distance, their polished hulls glittering in the bright sunlight. In the centre of the arc and slightly elevated above the rest, shone the blue hull and the white glistening wings of the *Ithuriel*, and close in her wake followed the *Isma*.

When the advancing fleet was within five miles of the mountains it slowed down from four hundred to about fifty miles an hour. At the same instant the other fleet ran up the Aerian and Federation flags and the simply eloquent signal, "Welcome Home!" flew from the lofty foremast of the *Avenger*. It was instantly acknowledged by the *Ithuriel*, and then on all the five hundred vessels the Aerian and Federation flags were run to the mastheads and dipped three times in greeting.

Then the two points of the vast crescent that they formed swung slowly and regularly forward until the arc was inverted and the *Ithuriel* and the *Isma* came along side by side midway between the two horns.

When the two fleets were within half a mile of each other the *Avenger*, with twenty-five of her consorts on each side, swung round into line with their prows pointing towards the mountains, and in this order, at fifty miles an hour and an elevation of a thousand feet above the Ridge, the combined squadrons swept across the mountain barrier, and Alan and Alexis, each steering his own vessel in the conning-tower, saw for the first time, after nearly seven years of exile, the incomparable beauties of the Aerian landscape opening out before their eyes.

Following the movements of the leading squadron, they dipped as soon as they had passed over the Ridge, and were

met on their downward flight by the hundreds of pleasure-craft which were waiting for them in mid-air.

Thousands of gaily-coloured handkerchiefs were waved in welcome to them, and many a greeting in the sign-language passed from the crews of the warships to the occupants of the pleasure-craft and back again, for some of the former had been on foreign service for nearly a year, and there were many pleasant relationships to be renewed which had been interrupted by the calls of duty.

Far below the home-comers could see the spacious streets of the great city, brilliant with the gaily attired throngs who had come to welcome them, and heard the greeting chorus of thousands of bells chiming in gladsome peals from hundreds of towers and minarets scattered over the city and its environs.

Signals were now flown from the *Avenger* directing the whole of Alan's fleet, excepting the *Ithuriel* and the *Isma*, to alight on a great sloping plain to the northward of the city, where their crews were to disembark and then proceed to the central hall of the Temple. Acting on previous orders, the consorts of the *Avenger* did the same. The pleasure-craft fluttered downwards on to the housetops, and so the three battleships were left alone in the air, the *Ithuriel* now floating on the right of the *Avenger* and the *Isma* on the left.

Amid the [illegible]ming cheers of the throngs which now filled the great square they sank slowly down, and at length alighted on the roof of the President's palace. Then the doors of the deck-chambers opened and a last and loudest cheer of all rose up as, in full view of the assembled thousands in the square, the President and Maurice Masarov once more clasped hands with their long-exiled sons.

Then they descended into the interior of the palace, followed by the Council and the other guests on board the *Avenger*.

In the President's room, the same in which he had received Olga Romanoff's challenge from the skies, Alan and Alexis were welcomed home again by those who were nearest and dearest to them. Only their immediate kindred were pre-

sent, for, in the nature of the case, the occasion could have been nothing but a private one. Nor could mere words of description do justice to the tender pathos of the scene that was enacted in that inner chamber, for but few words were spoken even by the actors in it. The emotions of such a moment were too intense and overpowering for speech, and so heart spoke to heart almost in silence.

Alma, who had, of course, remained outside in the reception-room of the palace with the Council and her parents, felt even more keenly than she had expected the truth of the prophecy that she had uttered to Isma an hour or so before. Amidst all the thousands of Aeria she was the only one whose heart was heavy on that day of universal rejoicing.

Once, and once only, her eyes had met Alan's, but the single swift glance had been more than enough to tell her how far they now stood apart. She had seen the light of pleasure and triumph suddenly die out of his eyes and the bright flush on his cheek pale as he looked at her.

There had not even been a greeting smile on his lips as he bowed his cold, grave salutation to her and then turned away to look down upon the city and the splendid prospect of the valley that was opening before him. This had happened up in mid-air, just as the ships had crossed the Ridge in close order, and she had not been able to trust herself to look at him again even when they had disembarked on the roof of the palace.

The swift telegraphy of that one glance had been enough to tell her that it was not the fond, light-hearted lover of her girlhood that had come back, but a strong, stern, and prematurely grave man, who knew all and more than she knew of the new relation between them, and who knew also that they could not meet as they had parted, and so accepted the changed conditions with a proud reserve that drew a sharp dividing line between them which, for all she knew, might never be crossed.

Though outwardly she was calm and perfectly self-possessed, she waited in a suspense that almost amounted to mental agony

for the moment when the greetings in the President's room would be over and Alan and Alexis would be brought out to be formally presented to the Council. Then their hands would have to meet and words would have to pass between them.

Meet as strangers they could not, for everyone knew—even he knew—why she had refused all these years to wed with any other man, nor yet could they meet as lovers, as Isma and Alexis had perhaps done by this time, for between them the shadow had fallen, and even if there was love in their hearts there could be none upon their lips.

If Olga Romanoff could have looked into Alma's soul at that moment, she would have seen something very like a fulfilment of a prophecy she had made on board the old *Ithuriel* six years and a half before to Alan, when she first heard of her rival—"By your hand I will wring her heart dry, and cast it aside to wither like an apple shaken from the tree!" In those moments of suspense it seemed to Alma that even now her heart was withering under the blight of this great sorrow that had fallen upon her life after all her years of loving and patient waiting.

At last she heard footsteps and voices in the corridor that led from the private apartments of the palace. They were coming, and almost mechanically she turned her eyes towards the curtains which screened the doorway through which they would enter. They parted, and Alan came in walking by his father's side and with Isma hanging laughing on his arm.

She shrank back a little as she saw Isma look at her for a moment and then say something to Alan. But he appeared to take no notice, and walked forward with his father to where the members of the Council were waiting to receive him. She heard the President say the formal words of presentation, and saw the rulers of Aeria one after another grasp his hands, and then those of Alexis, greeting them heartily as they did so.

Then the little group opened, and she saw, as in a waking dream, Alan's tall form striding towards her with both hands outstretched, and heard a voice that was his, and yet not his, so deep a ring of unwonted gravity was there in it, say—

"Are you going to be the only one who has no greeting for the prodigal, Alma? Have you forgotten that we were sweethearts once, and therefore surely may be friends now?"

There was an emphasis on the word "friends" that was perhaps imperceptible to all ears but hers, but she caught it, and took her cue from it instantly. With admirable tact he had, in that one word, shown her the only basis on which it would be possible for them to take part together in the society of the valley.

As man and woman they must be to one another as friends whose friendship was sweetened by the recollection that long ago, as boy and girl, they had been lovers. She accepted the situation with a sense of thankfulness and infinite relief, and, frankly placing her hands in his and summoning all her self-command to her aid, she looked steadily up into his bronzed, bearded face, and said gravely and sweetly—

"You know that that is not so, Alan, and if my welcome is a little tardy it is none the less sincere for that reason. There were others who had a prior claim, and so I waited, for it is only right that friends should come after kindred. Welcome home! I suppose we are going to the Council Hall now, to see what we are all longing so much to see—the Golden Wings once more upon your brows."

"Yes," replied Alan colouring slightly, as he noticed her upward glance at his sable head-gear, "we are going there immediately, I believe, but," he continued in a lower tone and still holding her hand in his, "long and anxiously as I have looked forward to to-day and its promise, half of that promise will be betrayed unless you tell me first that you believe I have fairly won the right to wear the Golden Wings again. Tell me, now, do you in your heart think so?"

"If you have not done so," she replied, only keeping her voice steady by a supreme effort, "then it would be hopeless for any man to look for forgiveness on earth. You have fallen and you have risen again, and to-day there are no two men in Aeria more worthy of honour than you and Alexis are."

He looked down into the clear depths of her soft grey eyes as she spoke, and in another instant he might have forgotten that which sealed his lips to all words of love, and all the reserve to which he had been schooling himself for so long, but at that moment Alma's mother came towards them saying that the President was ready to take Alan to the Council Hall, and—this with a smile—that thousands should not be kept waiting for the sake of one. Her words recalled him to himself, and, with an inclination of his black-plumed head, he said—

"That is enough, for now I know that I have heard the truth from the lips of my severest judge, and I am well content with it. I have not lost everything if you believe that I have regained my honour."

"We all believe that, Alan," said Alma's mother before her daughter could reply; "and, more than that, I know of no one in Aeria who thinks that you ever really lost it. Now go to your father. He is thinking of the thousands who are waiting anxiously for you in the Council Hall. You can finish this conversation later on."

He accepted the dismissal with a smile, and as he went back he saw Isma slip away from Alexis' side with a tell-tale blush on her lovely face, and, giving him a saucy, laughing glance as she passed him, run lightly across the room to Alma's side.

"Well," she said, reading too swiftly and not very correctly the altered expression of her friend's face, "have you made friends, then, after all? I thought you would, and—oh, Alma, I *am* so happy!"

"Yes," replied Alma gravely, though she could not repress a smile at the radiant face that looked up at hers, "we have made friends. But you seem to have done something more than that. Your explanations"—

"There were no explanations at all," interrupted Isma, rosy red from neck to brow. "When we met in the room he picked me up in his arms before everybody and kissed me—and after that of course there was nothing to be said."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE EVE OF BATTLE.

N irregular procession was now formed, at the head of which walked the two returned exiles, each with his father by his side, and followed by the rest of the company. They passed out of the reception-room, down the wide entrance-hall, and out of the great arched portal which opened on to the square.

As they appeared at the top of the spacious flight of marble steps which led from it down to the pavement, a mighty cheer of welcome went up from a hundred thousand throats, the peals of bells in the four towers which rose from the angles of the Council Hall sent forth the signal to all the other belfries of the city, and, amidst the jubilant chorus that instantly burst forth, the scene of the reinvestiture was reached. Then the great bell in the dome tolled out one sonorous warning note, and instantly there was silence on the earth and in the air.

This was at the moment that the procession, after passing half round the square along the broad path left for it by the cheering throng, halted in front of the main entrance to the Temple of Aeria, which faced towards the south, in the middle of the magnificent façade fronting a marble-paved avenue of double rows of palms and tree-ferns which ran in a straight line for three miles down to the shores of the lake.

The Aerians had progressed far beyond the stage of semi-barbaric pomp and display, and so the ceremony of restoring

to Alan and Alexis the rights of citizenship, of which the Golden Wings were the symbol, solemn as it was, was also simple in the extreme.

As the vast curtains which hung over the main doors of the Temple swung aside to admit them, they fell out of the procession and doffed their sable head-gear. The President and his fellow Councillors went on and took up their position in front of the three pillars under the centre of the dome.

Then a guard of honour, composed of a hundred of their shipmates and companions-in-arms from Kerguelen, marched up to the door and formed into two files, between which Alan and Alexis walked down the aisle through the space left by the orderly throng that filled the vast building from the floor to the topmost tier of the rows of seats which rose half-way up the lofty walls, and so came in front of the President and the Council.

Here their guard halted and formed a semicircle, leaving them in the open space within it. A breathless silence fell upon the assembled thousands as they dropped on one knee before the President. Then, in a voice whose every accent rang distinctly to the farthest corners of the huge building, he said—

"Alan Arnold and Alexis Masarov, the year of your probation ended with the rising of this morning's sun. You have been tried and you have not been found wanting, and that of which the arch-enemy of our race robbed you for a time you have regained by manly valour and patient devotion.

"Therefore, by command of the Supreme Council, and with the consent of all the citizens of Aeria, I restore to you the symbols of those rights which you lost and have regained.

"In the presence of God and this assembly, and on the holy ground that is sanctified by the ashes of those mighty ancestors of ours who bequeathed to us the empire of the world, I replace the Golden Wings upon your brows, in the full belief that from the higher and happier sphere they now inhabit they are looking down with approval upon the act.

"Rise now, recrowned Princes of the Air, and in the near

approaching day of battle go forth with fearless hearts and stainless honour to do that which the voice of duty and the needs of humanity shall bid you do!"

As he ceased speaking he held out a hand to each of them, and so they rose to their feet again, once more wearing the Golden Wings, once more free and equal amidst their peers of the Royal race of Aeria. As they did so a burst of jubilant melody rolled out, apparently from all parts of the Temple at once.

It was the opening chorus of a triumphal march which the greatest living musician of Aeria, and therefore of the world, had composed in honour of the day and the event, and as its splendid harmonies rolled out from the hidden organ through the vast interior, and through the open portals into the square beyond, the great assembly filed out in four streams from the Temple, and all Aeria made ready to give itself up to feasting and merry-making for the rest of the day.

For three days Aeria kept high festival in honour of the home-coming of the son of the President and his companion in exile, but for all that there was sterner business in hand than merry-making for those in authority. Save in the almost impossible event of overtures of peace being received from the Sultan, war which, in the nature of the circumstances, could hardly fail to be universal, would actually begin at daybreak on the 16th of May, that is to say in five days after the return of Alan and Alexis.

The greater part, therefore, even of the days of rejoicing was really spent in hard work by those upon whom had devolved the tremendous responsibility of counteracting as far as was possible the designs of conquest and oppression to which Olga Romanoff, by means of her fatal beauty and subtle diplomacy, had succeeded in irrevocably committing Khalid the Magnificent.

Early on the morning of the day following the reinvestiture of Alan and Alexis with the symbols of Aerian citizenship a council of war was held in the President's palace, which was attended by all the members of the ruling Council, the chief

engineers of the settlement, and the admirals in command of the aerial and sea navies and the squadrons posted at the various stations throughout the world.

Before this assembly Alan, who had already entered upon the active discharge of his duties as Commander-in-Chief of all the forces of Aeria and the Federation, laid the details of his plans of attack and defence, and invited criticism upon them.

The same day Alan transferred his flag and his crew from the *Ithuriel* to the *Avenger*, while Alexis took possession of a splendid vessel of the same type, to which the name *Orion* had been given, after that of the air-ship commanded by Alan Tremayne in the battle of Armageddon. Alexis, however, had very little difficulty in obtaining the consent of the Council to his substituting another name for this, with the consequence that the prize taken from the enemy resumed her Russian name, and remained in Aeria as a trophy of the skill of her captors.

Perhaps in his heart Alan would have dearly liked to have made a similar change in the name of the *Avenger*, but it was impossible for him to propose it, situated as he was with regard to Alma.

Alexis and Isma had taken the shortest, and therefore the wisest, course out of the terribly delicate and embarrassing position which had been created by the unholy passions and ruthless treachery of Olga Romanoff. They had tacitly agreed to ignore it *in toto*, and to begin again where they had left off nearly seven years before, and thus it came to pass that Isma's own pretty hands spilled the christening wine over the shapely bows of her formidable namesake.

The first use that Alan made of his new ship was to test her immense capabilities to the utmost, so that he might know what demands he might safely make upon her in possible emergencies. He rushed her at full speed round the mountain bulwarks of Aeria, a distance of two hundred and fifty miles, and found that she completed the circuit in just twenty-five minutes, which gave a speed of six hundred miles an hour. Alexis followed, and covered the same distance in twenty-seven minutes and a half in the *Isma*.

These trials proved that the new Aerian vessels were from fifty to seventy-five miles an hour faster than the models on which their enemies had been building their new fleets—a fact which, unless Olga and her ally had made a corresponding improvement in their battleships, might be expected to have a considerable effect on the issue of the coming war.

After the speed-trials the soaring powers of the two vessels were tried, and it was demonstrated that their machinery was sufficiently powerful to carry them to altitudes beyond which it was not possible for human beings to breathe. After this all the defences of Aeria were visited and examined in detail, and then on the second day after their arrival in the valley Alan and Alexis divided all the air-ships at their disposal into two squadrons, each numbering nearly four hundred vessels, one of which, commanded by Alan, guarded the valley, while the other, under Alexis, constituted an attacking force, the duty of which was to find out, if possible, any weak point in the defensive organisation.

From noon to midnight the mimic battle went on in strict accordance with the accepted rules of aerial warfare, but though Alexis and the captains of his fleet tried everything that skill or daring could suggest, the defence proved too strong for them, and during the whole twelve hours they were unable to bring a single vessel into such a position that she could send a shell into Aeria without previously exposing herself to a fire that must have annihilated her in an instant.

This aerial review was the concluding spectacle of the festivities, and it was watched by the occupants of thousands of pleasure-craft, whose interest in it was sharpened by the knowledge that before many days a conflict such as it portrayed might be raging in deadly earnest round the mountain bulwarks of their hitherto inviolate domain.

So consummate was the skill displayed by Alan in this defence that as soon as the *Avenger* touched ground after the review was over he was summoned to the Council Chamber in the President's palace to receive the thanks of the Senate and cordial expression of the perfect confidence that the people of

Aeria would feel, whatever the magnitude of the war might prove to be, while the conduct of the campaign was in his hands and those of Alexis, whose tactics had also been so perfect that, without once putting a single ship in danger, he had made it impossible for Alan to do anything more than remain strictly on the defensive.

On the following day, the 14th, the motive power of all the vessels was renewed, ammunition laid in, and all the guns and engines minutely inspected, so that there might be no chance of failure when the moment of trial came. Then the final arrangements for the defence of Aeria itself were perfected, and when that was done, the Vale of Paradise, as its inhabitants fondly called their lovely land, was a vast fortress compared with which the strongholds of the present day would be as harmless and defenceless as molehills.

Four hundred aerial battleships of what were now called the first and second classes, ranging in speed from four to five hundred and fifty miles an hour and mounting from ten to twenty guns each, were to patrol the outer walls of the mountains, at distances of five and ten miles from them and at elevations varying from two to ten thousand feet. These were divided into two fleets of two hundred each which relieved each other every six hours, so that their supply of motive power might be constantly renewed.

In addition to these, two squadrons of twenty-five of the most powerful warships of the newest type alternately kept watch and ward against surprise in the upper regions of the air from fifteen to twenty thousand feet above the valley, while all round the great circuit of the mountains were planted in the most favourable positions nearly a thousand land batteries mounting three, five, and ten guns each, which, if necessary, would be able to surround Aeria with a zone of storm and flame which nothing living could pass and still live.

By day the range of vision from the decks of the sentinel ships would make surprise impossible, and at night the great electric suns on the summits of the mountains, aided by hundreds of search-lights flashing through the darkness in

Batteries which would be able to surround Aeria with a zone of Storm and Flame.

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every direction, made an attack under cover of the darkness almost equally hopeless.

The news of the alliance between Olga and the Sultan had acted like a trumpet-call to battle on the proud and martial spirit of the Aerians. Generation after generation their young men had been trained in the arts of war as well as in those of peace, for the wisdom of their ancestors had foreseen that, in the ordinary progress of science, it was impossible for many generations to pass without some independent solution of the problem of aerial navigation, which must, sooner or later, result in a challenge of their supremacy.

Consequently, all through the years of profound peace which the outside world had enjoyed under their rule, their vigilance had never slept for a moment, and their men and ships and materials of war were kept in the highest possible state of efficiency. Thus, though the Aerian nation numbered little more than a million souls, inhabiting a territory of some two hundred and fifty square miles, the amount of effective strength that it was able to put forth on an emergency was totally disproportionate to its size.

Living in a region of inexhaustible fertility and boundless mineral wealth, with no idle or mere consuming classes, no politics, and no laws that a child of ten could not understand, they led simple, natural, and busy lives, accumulating immense public and private riches, which were as constantly expended in increasing the splendour and power of the State, which, as a whole, was the expression of the wealth and patriotism of its citizens.

No sooner had the alliance of their enemies become an accomplished fact than they devoted the whole of their vast resources to increasing their offensive and defensive armaments to the utmost of their power. Reserves of material that had been stored up year after year had been drawn upon, the mighty natural forces that they had brought into subjection laboured night and day for them, and ships and machinery and guns came into existence as though at the bidding of some race of magicians.

Magazines were filled with immense stores of ammunition, potential death and destruction such as had never been wielded by human hands before—and commanders and officers for all the battleships of the Federation had been sent out as each squadron of vessels was completed.

In a word, Aeria had donned her panoply of war, and stood armed at all points, ready to fight the world if necessary in defence of the priceless heritage which its citizens had received from their fathers, the giants who in the days of the Terror had taken despotism and oppression by the throat and flung them headlong out of the world.

The defences of Aeria were to be under the immediate command of the President. All the oceanic stations, save Kerguelen, Teneriffe, Bermuda, and Hawaii, had been abandoned so as to permit of greater concentration of forces, while fifty new ones had been established in different parts of Europe and the British Islands, for here the brunt of the attack was to be expected, and here the enemy must be met and crushed if Anglo-Saxon civilisation was to be saved from a new era of militarism and personal oppression.

Alan and Alexis were to take command of the Western and Eastern fleets into which the aerial forces were to be divided, Alan in the West with Britain as his chief base of operation, and Alexis in the East with the Balkan Peninsula as his base between the Russian and Moslem headquarters.

The naval fleets, in three divisions, the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific squadrons, had already received their general instructions, and were waiting at their various rendezvous for the outbreak of hostilities. The Atlantic squadron blocked the Straits of Gibraltar, the Narrow Seas of Britain, and the approaches to the Baltic, the Mediterranean division patrolled the Inland Sea from Gibraltar to Cyprus, and the Pacific fleet were blockading the southern approach to the Red Sea, ready to operate against any junction of the Indian and African sea forces of the Sultan.

At midnight, on the 14th, Alan and Alexis were to set out for their respective fields of operation, and that evening there

was a farewell banquet given by the Council in the President's palace in honour of them and the commanders of their ships. Many a hearty toast was given and drunk in the sparkling golden wine of Aeria, and many a hearty God-speed and loving farewell passed between those who remained at home and those who were going forth to do battle for them and for the peace of the world in distant skies, and to pass through the fiery storm of such warfare as had never been waged in the world before.

Just before twelve, when the fleets were ready to take the air, and the last farewells were being said, the *Avenger* and the *Isma* were lying on the roof of the President's palace, and their commanders were standing by the gangway steps which hung down from the deck-chambers, the centres of two little groups of grave, silent men and sorrowing women, their nearest and dearest in a land where all were friends.

The last blessings of fathers and mothers had been given and taken, and then came the hardest farewells of all. Isma and Alexis parted as declared lovers will part as long as the Fates are cruel, but when Alan took Alma's hands in his for the last time, and looked down upon the pale loveliness of her perfect face and into the clear calm depths of her eyes, the word that he had been longing to say ever since his return died upon his lips.

The contrast between her stainless purity and the darkness of the blot that Olga's unholy passion had placed upon his life rose up in all its horror for the hundredth time before him, and once more the impassable gulf opened between them. All that he could say was—

"Good-bye, Alma! You, too, will wish me God-speed, won't you?"

"With all my heart, yes, Allan," she replied in low, sweet, steady tones. "God guard you in your good work and send you back in safety to us. You will come back rich in honours and followed by the blessings of the world you are going to rescue from the oppressors"—

"Or I shall never come! Good-bye, Alma, good-bye, all!"

he said, breaking upon her speech, for he could bear to hear no more, and as he spoke he stooped and kissed her forehead as he had kissed Isma's a few moments before. Then he turned and ran up the steps just as Alexis took his last kiss and did the same.

As they gained the decks of their ships the great bell in the dome of the Temple boomed out the first stroke of twelve. At the sixth stroke the electric suns on the summits of the mountains blazed out simultaneously at a hundred points, a long, deep roar of thunder rolled round the bulwarks of Aeria, and with search-lights flashing out ahead and astern, the four hundred battleships of the two squadrons rose into the air and swept up towards the Ridge.

A thousand feet above it they stopped and hung for a moment motionless in mid-air. Then the roar of a thousand shells exploding far up in the quaking sky answered the salutes from the sentinel ships, and then, still signalling farewells with their search-lights, the squadrons swept out into the ocean of darkness that loomed round the light-girdled realm of Aeria.

THE FOUR HUNDRED BATTLESHIPS OF THE TWO SQUADRONS ROSE INTO THE AIR.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FIRST BLOW.

THE night of the 15th of May 2037 was passed in an agony of apprehension by nearly the whole of civilised humanity. The long threatened and universally feared thunder-cloud of war had at last loomed up over the serene horizon of peace in full view of the whole world.

Although the events of the last six years had to some extent prepared the minds of men for the impending disaster, now that the last hour of the long peace was really about to strike there were very, very few among the millions of non-combatants who were able to rise superior to the universal panic.

The ocean terrorism which had paralysed the commerce of the world five years and a half before, fearful as it had been, was, so far as the bulk of humanity was concerned, a terror of the unseen. Ships had gone out to sea and had vanished into the depths, leaving no trace behind them, but the hand that struck the blow had remained invisible.

Now, however, this same terror, magnified a thousandfold, was to come close up to the shores of lands whose inhabitants had never known what it was for man to raise his hand against his brother. To-morrow the sun would rise as usual, the earth would smile, the sea would dance, and the air grow bright and warm under his beams, yet air and earth and sea would be wholly strange to the eyes of men, for they would be invested with terrors hitherto only pictured by the fears of panic.

The air would be charged with death. Beneath the laughing waves great battleships would be speeding swiftly, silently, and invisibly on their errands of destruction, and the fair face of earth would be scarred by the harrow of battle, and seared with the fires of murderous passion.

The ocean traffic of the world had been almost wholly at a standstill for nearly a month. Transports which could complete their voyages before the end of the truce had done so; but since the 1st of May only short voyages had been attempted, for it was known that escape from the attack of a submarine battleship would be absolutely impossible for any vessels that floated on the surface of the water.

The immediate results of this had of course been the dislocation of trade and commerce and ever-increasing scarcity of food in the great centres of population. Impossible, absurd even, as it still seemed to those who had not thoroughly recognised the tremendous gravity of the situation, the inhabitants of the magnificent cities of the old and new worlds were actually within measurable distance, even before a blow had been struck, of seeing the spectre of Famine cross the threshold of their palaces.

In a few days communications by land would be as difficult and as dangerous as those by sea, for, swift as the trains were, their speed was far excelled by that of the slowest air-ship, which could wreck them with a single shot. Bridges would be destroyed, stations blown up, and lines cut in a hundred places at once, till railway travelling would have to cease all over the world.

Thus the most splendid civilisation of all the ages stood trembling on the verge of destruction at the moment when the sleepless eyes of the inhabitants of Alexandria saw the first faint glow of the dawn brightening the eastern sky. No one knew where or how the first blow would be struck in the strange and terrible warfare for the commencement of which the rising of that morning's sun gave the signal.

There were scarcely any elements in common with the war of the nineteenth century save the slaughter and destruction

that it would entail. There could be no marshalling of fleets or warships on the sea, for to be detected by an enemy would be coming very near to being destroyed. Every blow would have to be struck swiftly, silently, and without warning, for only one could be struck, and to fail would be to be lost.

So, too, in the air, as had been proved at Kerguelen and Mount Terror. Everything would depend upon the supreme strategy which enabled the first fatal shot to be sent home that would decide battle after battle without hope for the vanquished to recover from their defeat.

But after all it would be on land that the terrors of the new warfare would be most fearfully manifested. It needed but little effort of the highly-strung imaginations of those who were waiting for the world-tragedy to begin to picture vast armies, magnificent in their strength and splendid in their equipments, marching to grapple with each other on some field of Titanic strife. Suddenly and without warning they would be smitten by an invisible foe floating far above the clouds, or perhaps visible only as a tiny speck of light high in the central blue.

Their battalions would be torn to pieces, their regiments decimated and thrown into confusion, their commanders—the brains of the huge organisms—would have no such protection as they had in the wars of former times, for the aerial artillery would reach everywhere, and the Commander-in-Chief in his headquarters would be as much exposed as the private in his bivouac.

Thus the brain would be destroyed and the body reduced to impotence; disciplined armies would become lawless and unregulated hordes in a few days or weeks, and the organised slaughter of the battlefield would be exchanged for the butchery and plunder of the city carried by assault.

It was little wonder, then, that the world watched the ending of its last night of peace and the dawning of its first day of battle with feelings such as men had not felt for five generations, if, indeed, ever before in the history of man.

It was not a mere war of nations with which men were confronted. The evil genius of a single woman had achieved the unheard-of feat of dividing the human race into two hostile forces so nearly balanced in strength that mutual destruction seemed a not improbable issue of what might after all prove to be the death-struggle of humanity, the collapse of civilisation and the sinking of a remnant of mankind back to the level of barbarians whose children would wander amidst the ruins of their forefathers' habitations, and wonder what race of demi-gods had created the wondrous fabrics whose very fragments were splendid.

As the dawn flew round the world on that momentous morning every eye was turned towards the heavens, on every lip there was but one question: Where will the first blow be struck? and in every heart there was but one thought: Will it reach me or my dear ones?

The focus of all human interest was for a moment Alexandria, for it was known that from there the main expeditionary force was to be sent out to, if possible, effect a landing on the shores of Italy, while other expeditions were to start from Tripoli, Tunis, and Oran to effect landings in France and Spain. The bridge across the Straits of Gibraltar from Point Cires to Gualdamesi was to all intents and purposes neutral, since it would have been madness to send trains conveying troops across it when a single shot from the British battery at Gibraltar would have shattered the bridge to fragments.

The forces destined by the Sultan for the invasion of Europe would, therefore, either have to be conveyed in swift transports by sea, protected by squadrons of air-ships and flotillas of submarine battleships, or else they would have to go by land round the Levant by Syria, and so through Asia Minor to the shores of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.

As the European shores of these two straits were known to be defended by concealed batteries mounting guns a single shot from which would blow the biggest transport afloat out of the water, the Sultan had decided to make the attempt to

invade Italy, France, and Spain by sea, while the Russian forces, with their Asiatic allies, were to attack the central nations from the east.

So far, therefore, as could be foreseen, the Mediterranean would once more be the arena of strife, and on some part of its shores or its waters the first blow of the war would be struck. Every possible preparation for the attack upon Europe had been finally completed immediately after the return of Khalid from the coronation of Olga on the 11th, but beyond the fact that the coasts of Europe, from the Straits of Dover to the Golden Horn, were patrolled by Federation battleships, nothing was known of the dispositions which had been made for the defence of Europe.

Gibraltar, Minorca, Cape Spartivento, Mount Ida in Candia and Olympus in Cyprus formed a chain of Federation posts which, while they had been made impregnable to all attack save long-sustained bombardment from the air, rendered any attempt on the part of large fleets to cross the Mediterranean an extremely hazardous venture.

These stations were connected from Gibraltar to Cyprus by telephonic cables, buried beneath the floor of the sea to hide them from the enemy's cruisers, and also by patrols of battleships constantly moving to and fro in touch with each other along the whole line, and this was the first barrier through which the Moslem Sultan had to force his way before he could land his armies upon the shores of Southern Europe.

This, too, formed what may be termed the first line of defence of the Federation and of Christendom, and although neither the Sultan nor the Tsarina was wholly aware of the fact, it had been strengthened to such a degree that it was expected to prove unbreakable even under the impact of the immense forces that would be brought to bear upon it.

When the sun at last rose over the hills of Syria and Sinai, and the watchers in the streets and on the housetops of Alexandria heard the voice of the Muezzin calling the first hour of prayer and the last hour of the world's peace, the bright blue waves of the Inland Sea lay smiling and sparkling

in its earliest beams, betraying not a trace of the hidden forces which waited but for the signal that might come either from land or sea or sky to begin the work of desolation.

The harbours of the city were thronged with shipping, great transports lined the miles of quays whose network fronted the seaward verge of the Moslem capital. Some of the basins swarmed with the half-submerged hulls of scores of battleships waiting to take up their position as convoys to the flotilla which, if the Sultan's plans succeeded, would, within the next twelve hours, land nearly four million troops on European soil.

In the air, at elevations varying from five hundred to ten thousand feet, a squadron of two hundred aerial cruisers kept watch and ward against a surprise from the upper regions of the air. By the time the day had fully dawned, land and sea and sky had been scanned in vain for a sign of an enemy's presence.

The sailing of the flotilla of transports had been fixed for six o'clock by Alexandrian time, and already the battleships were moving out into the open to take up their places in advance of the fleet of transports. Fifty air-ships had ranged themselves in a long line to seaward at an elevation of two thousand feet to protect the transports from an aerial assault, and the transports themselves were moving out to form in the basin behind the breakwater, whence they were to commence their voyage.

Sultan Khalid, on board his aerial flagship *Al Borak*—named after the winged steed which, according to the old legend, had borne the Prophet from earth to the threshold of the Seventh Heaven—superintended in person the last preparations for the departure of his great armament. Flying hither and thither, now soaring and now sinking, he inspected first the cruisers of the air and then the flotillas of the seas, and at last, when all was ready, he took his place by one of the bow guns of the *Al Borak* to fire the shot that was to be the signal for the expedition to start.

But a higher intelligence and a greater tactical ability than his had already determined that the signal should be given

THREE OF THE AIR-SHIPS SEEMED TO BREAK UP AND ROLL OVER.

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in very different fashion. Fifty miles to the south towards the Lybian desert, high in air, fifteen thousand feet above the earth, a solitary air-ship hung suspended in the central blue.

As the sun rose she had moved slowly forward towards the city. As she came within sight of it, Alan Arnold standing in her conning-tower saw through a telescope that commanded a range of a hundred miles the disposition of the aerial fleet above Alexandria. He marked down a group of five air-ships floating some five thousand feet above the centre of the city, and singled them out as the first victims of the war.

He was, of course, far out of range of gun-fire, and to have gone within range and fired on them would have been to expose his single ship to a concentrated hail of projectiles which would have scattered her in dust through the sky. So he determined to open the game of death and destruction by a stroke as dramatic as it was terrible.

He remembered how his ancestor, Richard Arnold, in the first *Ithuriel*, had rammed the Russian war-balloons to the north of Muswell Hill, and resolved to eclipse even that marvellous stroke of tactics. Obeying his will like a living creature, the mighty fabric under his control sank five thousand feet and then began to gather way on a slanting course towards the Moslem air-ships.

The propellers whirled faster and faster, and the quadruple wings undulated with ever-increasing velocity until the crowds in the streets of Alexandria saw something like a swift flash of blue light stream downward from the southern sky, and heard a long screaming roar as though the firmament was being rent in twain above them.

Then three of the air-ships floating in line above their heads seemed to break up and roll over. The crowds held their breath and pointed upwards with one accord in sudden horror, as the crippled air-ships dropped like stones towards the earth. In another moment they struck it, and then, as though the central fires of the earth had burst through in the heart of the great city, there came a crash and a shock that shook the ground like an earthquake spasm.

A vast dazzling volume of flame shot up from amidst a wide circle of blackened ruin, towers fell and roofs collapsed all round the focus of the explosion, the whole atmosphere above the city was convulsed, and the very sea itself seemed to writhe under the stress of the mighty shock, and so, leaving death and ruin and consternation behind her, the *Avenger* swept out over the Mediterranean at a speed that the eye could scarcely follow, after striking the first blow in the world-war of the twenty-first century.

To say that this sudden and unexpected catastrophe spread panic through the Moslem capital would be but a very inadequate description of the *Avenger's* first blow in the world-war. Consternation, wild and unbounded, blanched every cheek, and made every heart stand still as the mighty roar of the explosion burst upon the deafened ears of the inhabitants and then instantly died into silence, broken only by the crash of falling ruins and the screams and groans of the wounded and dying.

The red spectre of war in its most frightful form had suddenly appeared to the terrified and horror-stricken vision of millions of men and women, scarce one of whom had ever seen a deed of violence done.

Khalid, like a wise leader, did all he could to prevent the panic spreading to the troops on board the transports by issuing peremptory orders for the expedition to start at once. At the same time he signalled for half a dozen air-ships to ascend as far as possible and attempt to discover the source from which the inexplicable attack had come, an errand destined to be entirely fruitless.

In orderly succession the hundred huge transports, each carrying from eight to ten thousand men, left the outer basin in two long lines in the rear of the fifty air-ships already in position.

A hundred submarine battleships took up their stations five hundred yards in advance of the first line of transports. Fifty of these sank to a depth of thirty feet, and shot two thousand yards ahead as soon as the whole flotilla was in motion, while the other fifty ran along the surface of the

water with their conning-towers just showing above the waves, ready to sink in obedience to any signal that their commanders might receive from the air-ships, which commanded an immense range of vision over the waters.

To all appearance the enemy was content with the one terrible blow that had already been struck. The smooth, sunlit sea betrayed no trace of a hostile vessel, and as far as the glasses of those on board the air-ships could sweep the sky nothing but the blue atmosphere, flecked here and there with white, fleecy clouds, could be seen.

But the Moslem commanders were far from being deceived by these peaceful appearances. From Sultan Khalid, who was commanding the expedition in person, to the engineers who worked the transports, all knew that the invisible line of the Federation patrols had to be passed somewhere in the depths of the sea before the shores of Italy could be reached.

The speed of the three flotillas was limited to twenty-five miles an hour, in order that there might be no headlong running into danger, and the commander of each of the submerged battleships had orders to rise to the surface the instant that his tell-tale needle denoted the presence of an enemy, and signal the fact to the rest of the squadron. The transports were then to stop, and were not to resume their passage until the battleships had cleared the way for them. The first division was to engage the enemy, while the second was to remain on the surface ready to defend the transports in case of need.

For six hours the expedition proceeded on its way north-west by west from Alexandria without interruption. The intention was to pass about a hundred miles to the south of the Federation post at Candia, between which island and the Cape Spartivento the ocean patrol would most likely be met with.

Soon after twelve those on board the Sultan's flagship detected half a dozen little points of light shining amidst the waves to the north-westward. They could be nothing else but the scout-ships of the patrol; and although they were nearly ten miles away, a couple of shells were discharged at them from the *Al Borak's* bow gun, more as a warning to the Moslem flotilla

than in the hope of doing any damage. Whether they did or not was never known, for before the explosion of the shells was seen in the water the points of light had vanished.

Signals were at once made from the flagship ordering the transports to stop, and the second division of battleships to stand by to protect them. A dozen remained on the surface of the water, running round and round the now stationary troopships in concentric circles. The others sank to varying depths, and scattered until the vague fluctuations of their needles showed that they were more than a thousand yards from each other and the transports.

As the first division had orders to keep more than two miles in advance as soon as an enemy was discovered, there would be no danger of ramming friend instead of foe. It ran on for seven miles after the main body stopped. It was moving in a single line, the vessels being at an equal distance apart, so that, with the exception of the two ships at the extremities of the line, the attraction of the steel hulls on the needles should be neutralised, and therefore only give indications of vessels ahead.

At the end of the seventh mile the tell-tales ceased their wavering motions and began to point steadily, in slightly varying directions, ahead. The moment they did so the engines were stopped and the flotilla rose to the surface of the water. Their commanders found themselves out of sight of the transports, but the *Al Borak*, attended by ten other air-ships, was floating about a thousand feet above them. From the flagship's mainmast-head flew the signal—"Fleet eight miles to the rear. Enemy ahead. Sink and ram."

The order was instantly obeyed by the whole division, and the fifty battleships simultaneously sank out of sight to engage the invisible enemy, while the Sultan and his companions on board the air-ships waited in intense anxiety to see what the next few fateful minutes would bring forth.

No human eye could see what work of death might be going on down in the depths of the sea. Even those who took part in it would know it only by its results, and of these only the

victors would know anything. They would reappear on the surface of the waves, but the vanquished would never rise again.

Minute after minute passed and still the anxious watchers on the air-ships saw nothing. The bright, sunlit waves rippled on over the abyss in which the conflict must by this time be almost over. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and still no sign. Had Khalid been a mile or two farther on and closer down to the surface of the sea, he would have seen streams of air-bubbles rising swiftly here and there and instantly breaking. But from where he was he could see nothing.

Five more minutes went by and suspense gave place to apprehension. Had the whole of the first division simply sunk to its destruction into some invisible trap that had been laid for it deep down in the watery abyss? If not, how came it that not even one of the battleships had risen to the surface to tell the tale of victory or defeat?

Khalid knew that the squadron would obey orders and hurl itself at full speed, that is to say, at some hundred and fifty miles an hour, upon the enemy the moment the tell-tales found their mark. In two or three minutes—five at the outside—their rams must either have done their work or failed to do it. If they had done it they would have risen to the surface; if they had failed and themselves escaped destruction they would still have risen.

Now twenty minutes had passed and not one of the fifty battleships had reappeared. What could this mean but disaster?

And disaster it did mean, but great as it was it was as nothing compared with the frightful catastrophe which followed close upon it. All eyes on board the air-ships were so intently fixed upon that portion of the sea where the squadron was expected to rise again that no one thought for the moment of looking back towards the transports until the dull rumbling roar of a series of explosions came rolling up out of the distance.

Instantly every glass was turned in the direction whence the sound came, and Khalid saw his great fleet of troopships

tossing about in the midst of a wild commotion of the waves, out of which vast masses of white water spouted as if from the depths of the sea, and amidst these ship after ship heeled over and sank into the white seething waters.

Uttering a cry of rage and despair, he headed the *Al Borak* at full speed towards the scene of the disaster. In three minutes he was floating over it, helpless to do anything to avert or even delay the swift destruction that was overwhelming the splendid fleet. Distracted by impotent rage and passionate sorrow for the fate of his soldiers and sailors, who were being slain hopelessly and by wholesale beneath his eyes, he watched the awful submarine storm rage on, wrecking ship after ship, and swallowing them up with all the thousands on board in the boiling gulfs which opened ever and anon amidst the waves.

When the first panic passed, the transports which were still uninjured scattered and headed away as fast as their engines would drive them to the southward, where the only chance of safety seemed to lie. But there was no escape for them from their invisible and merciless enemies.

The fate of one magnificent transport, the flagship of the fleet, may be described as an illustration of the general disaster. She was a vessel of fifty thousand tons measurement, and her crew and complement of troops numbered together nearly twenty-five thousand. She escaped the first discharge from the submarine torpedoes unharmed, and heading southward with her triple propellers revolving at their utmost velocity, rushed through the water at a speed of more than forty nautical miles an hour.

She had scarcely gained a mile on her course when the glass-domed conning-tower of a battleship appeared for an instant above the waves. Before Khalid, not knowing whether it was friend or foe, could make up his mind to fire on it, it disappeared again.

A few seconds later the great ship stopped and shuddered with some mighty shock, as though she had run head-on to a sunken reef, and heeled over to one side. Then came a dull roar, a huge column of white foaming water rose up under her

side amidships, and she broke in two and vanished in the midst of a white space of swirling eddies.

Such scenes as this were occurring simultaneously in twenty different parts of the naval battlefield. The foe never showed himself save for an instant. Then came the blow that meant destruction, and the victim vanished. There was none of the pomp and pageantry of modern naval warfare; no splendid armaments of mighty ironclads and stately cruisers vomiting thunder and flame and storms of shot and shell at each other, nor were there any rolling masses of battle smoke to darken the brightness of the sky.

The occupants of an open boat five miles away would not have known that the most deadly sea-fight ever waged since men had first gone down to the sea in ships was being fought out under that smiling May-day sky.

One after another the flying transports were overtaken, rammed, or blown up and sunk by the pitiless monsters which unceasingly darted hither and thither a few feet below the surface of the water, and in less than two hours after the first alarm had been given the last of the hundred transports which had sailed that morning from Alexandria had gone down a shattered wreck into the abysses of the Inland Sea.

There was no chance of saving the drowning wretches who managed to escape from the eddies of the sinking ships, as there would have been in a naval battle of to-day. The air-ships could not do so without sinking to the waves, and so making themselves marks for the irresistible rams and torpedoes of their enemies, who themselves could not be merciful, even if they would, shut up as they were in the steel leviathans whose only use was destruction.

Khalid the Magnificent, with a heart well-nigh breaking with rage and shame and sorrow, watched in passionate helplessness the destruction of his splendid fleet and the drowning, like rats in a pond, of the soldiers who were to have borne the banner of the Crescent over the conquered fields of Christendom.

More than a million men had perished beneath his eyes, and

he had not been able to fire a shot to help them, although he was in command of an aerial fleet which could have dispersed an army or wrecked a city between sunrise and noon.

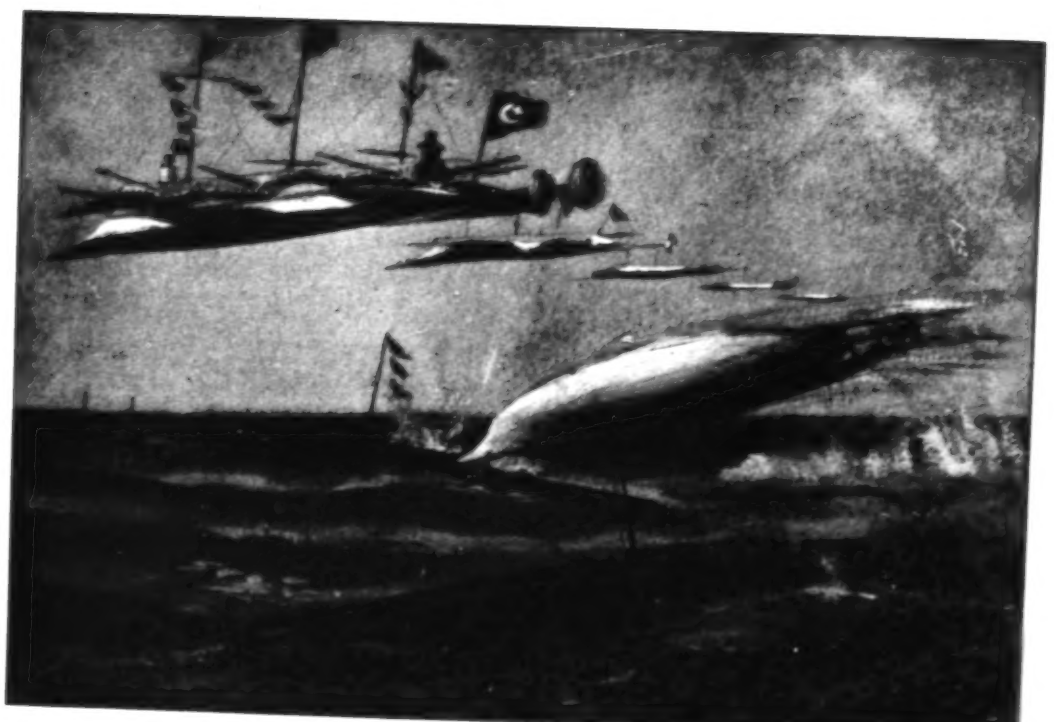
But the strangest part of the strange battle was yet to come. After the last of the transports had disappeared, the attack ceased and the assailants vanished. In a few minutes the sea was as calm and bright as ever, and only a few bits of broken wooden wreckage floating here and there betrayed the fact that anything out of the common had happened.

The remnant of the Moslem squadron rose to the surface and signalled for instructions. Only twenty of them remained uninjured out of the hundred that had gone into the fight. Before the signals could be returned there was a loud hiss and a swirling noise as of some huge body rushing at a furious speed through the water, and a great battleship leapt up out of the nether waters, and hurled herself at a speed of nearly two hundred miles an hour into the midst of the floating squadron.

Her gleaming ram of azurine tore its way through the sides of three vessels in such swift succession that, almost before their fragments had time to sink, her huge bulk vanished under the waves again. But hardly was her work done than a second battleship charged into the paralysed squadron, sending two of its members to the bottom and crippling three more before she, too, vanished into the safe obscurity of the depths.

A third was met by a storm of shells from the air-ships, which burst round her and under her just as she came to the surface, and blew her out of the water in fragments. Heedless of this, a fourth plunged fiercely through the foaming area of the explosion, and had wrecked two more Moslem vessels before a shell smashed her propeller and laid her helpless on the water. Two of the Moslems instantly backed out and rushed at her, tearing two great ragged holes in her side and sinking her instantly, only to be sunk themselves in turn by a fifth charge from below.

Scarcely had this last foe disappeared in safety than a swarm of torpedoes, converging from all sides, encircled the remaining Moslem battleships. Some plunged beneath the waves to



A great Battleship leapt up out of the Nether Waters.

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escape them, but these never reappeared. The remainder, torn and twisted and shattered by a series of explosions that flung the water mountains high all round them, sank like stones, and when the sea once more settled down, the grim work of death had been completed.

The fate which had so swiftly overwhelmed the expedition that had set out from Alexandria had almost simultaneously befallen four other expeditions which had started at the same hour from Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, and Oran. The one disaster had been an almost exact reproduction of the others.

The same order, formation, and tactics had been observed in each of the five cases, and each of the five squadrons of transports and fleets of submarine battleships had been overwhelmed and completely destroyed by the same mysterious fate. Of five hundred transports and the same number of battleships which Sultan Khalid had possessed at sunrise on that fatal 16th of May not a single one remained by sundown, and of the more than three million souls who had manned the five fleets not one man survived.

Of the strength or the losses of the enemy that had wrought this appalling and unheard-of destruction within such a brief space of time nothing could, in the nature of the case, be known by those who had seen only some of its effects from the decks of the air-ships which floated almost helplessly over the waves which were engulfing their naval consorts. The work of annihilation had for the most part been done in the dim and silent depths of the sea, and all that they knew was the number of those of their own comrades who had gone to battle and never returned.

And yet to all practical intents and purposes these five stupendous blows which had simultaneously crushed the Moslem sea-power and half crippled the military strength of the Sultan had been struck by one hand. In other words, the victory of the Mediterranean was due to two inventions which had been made and perfected by Max Ernstein, who had been transferred from Kerguelen and appointed Admiral in Command of the whole Mediterranean forces of the Federation.

One of these was a highly improved form of an apparatus which had just come into use on board battleships and cruisers when the War of the Terror broke out. This was an electrical contrivance which gave warning, more or less reliable, of the approach of torpedoes, by translating the aqueous vibrations set up by them into sound-waves, which increased in intensity as the hidden destroyer came nearer.

This invention had been lost sight of when all the warships of the world were sunk in the South Atlantic after the proclamation of the Universal Peace. Ernstein's was therefore a new discovery, or rediscovery, but the advantages of his position, far ahead of the scientific skill of the nineteenth century, had enabled him to produce a much more perfect instrument, and his apparatus, which was attached to all the battleships of the Federation, not only gave warning of the approach of an enemy, but indicated his direction, the number of revolutions at which his propellers were working, and his distance at any given moment.

This not only enabled the commander of a Federation battleship to detect the presence of an enemy, but it enabled him to distinguish between friend and foe. As soon as the phonetic indicator showed that another ship was approaching he stopped his own propellers, started them, and stopped them again.

The vibrations thus set up and interrupted would be conveyed to the indicator of the approaching ship, if she had one, and she would at once return the signal. If the signal was not returned it was safe to conclude that the coming vessel was an enemy and could be rammed accordingly.

When this invention replaced the tell-tale needle that had been in use a year before, an alteration in tactics became necessary, and the fighting order became more extended. A mile instead of a thousand yards was now the limit within which the Federation battleships were not permitted to approach each other, save under special circumstances. Every vessel acted as an independent unit, subject only to the general instructions.

Ernstein's second invention was of a simpler but none the less effective character. Knowing that the Moslem and Russian squadrons would be forced to trust entirely to their tell-tale magnetised needles, he had devised a plan for making these worse than useless. As soon as the phonetic indicator told him that an enemy was coming, the commander of each of his battleships dropped a thin cable of insulated wire down thirty or forty feet into the water below him.

The lower end of this cable was a powerful electro-magnet, through which a current of electricity was kept passing along the wires. The attraction of this magnet was far stronger than that of the hull of the vessel, and consequently the needles of the enemy were deflected downwards, and gave a totally erroneous idea as to the depth at which the Federation ship was floating.

Thus when the first division of the Moslem submarine squadron charged at what its commanders thought were the hulls of their enemies, their rams passed harmlessly underneath them, merely striking the magnet and knocking it aside. The moment they had passed the magnet, its attraction swung their needles back, and showed that some mysterious mistake had been committed, but before they had time to turn and seek the mark afresh the Federation ships were upon them, and their rams had rent their way into their sides.

In this manner every ship of the first division had been destroyed within three minutes after it had made its first and last charge. Then the Federationists had risen to the surface for an instant to reconnoitre by means of the arrangement of mirrors previously described, and sinking again had worked their way back towards the transports, formed in a huge circle round them, and had sent torpedo after torpedo into their midst.

As soon as the flotilla had been thrown into confusion they had converged until they could communicate with each other by means of their submarine signals, and after that they had attacked the enemy singly. Ship after ship charged into the *mêlée*, did her work, and retired, if she escaped destruction, to give place to another.

Only twenty Federation ships had been engaged in each of the five battles, and of these forty in all had been destroyed, a loss utterly disproportionate to the gigantic damage that had been done to the enemy.

Khalid the Magnificent divined intuitively that the disaster which had overwhelmed the expedition which he had commanded in person was only a portion of a result achieved by some elaborate and consummately-conceived scheme of defence which must have been simultaneously put into operation against his other expeditions. What had succeeded against his own might well have been expected to have succeeded against them.

He at once despatched four squadrons of ten air-ships each to Tripoli and Tunis, Algiers and Oran, with orders to collect all attainable information, and to return to Alexandria as soon after sunset as possible. Then he turned the prows of the remainder of his fleet towards his capital, and gave the signal for full speed ahead.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WAR AT ITS WORST.

WITHOUT even pausing to see the effects of his charge upon the three air-ships above Alexandria, Alan kept the *Avenger* going at full speed, soaring up into the higher regions of the atmosphere with her prow pointed to the north-east. About three hours later she was floating at an elevation of nearly five miles above Moscow, not stationary, but sweeping round and round in vast circles on her quadruple wings after the manner of the condors of the Andes, which thus sustain themselves on almost motionless wings at vast elevations and very small expenditure of force.

Below an immense expanse of country lay in unclouded clearness under the glasses of the captain of the ship and George Cosmo, late engineer of the *Narwhal*, who was now chief engineer of the Aerian flagship.

Not only Moscow, but a dozen other towns lay at the mercy of the *Avenger's* twenty-four guns, and yet no shot was fired, for Alan, despite the tremendous debt of vengeance that he owed to her who now, at last in very fact crowned Tsarina of the Russias, held her court at Moscow, was yet extremely loth to involve non-combatants in the destruction which he knew must follow the discharge of his guns.

Added to this, his present designs were rather to reconnoitre than to destroy. He was in command of the fastest and most powerful air-ship in the world, and the task that he had

set himself was to supervise the whole of the complicated arrangements that had been made for repelling the coming attack upon the Federation by the Moslems and Russians.

Thus he had started soon after midnight from Gibraltar, one of the chief power-stations and depôts in Europe. Thence he had run along the African coast over Oran, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, noting the sleepless activity of the brilliantly-lighted towns, the swarming transports and battleships in their harbours, and the crowds of anxious watchers in their streets. Then he had got round to the south of Alexandria, as has been seen, and there struck the first blow in the war.

Now, his object was to discover what disposition of troops were being made for the invasion of Austria and Germany. Another scout-ship would be by this time floating over St. Petersburg, and another over Odessa, and these were to report to him at noon.

He had kept the *Avenger* moving with sufficient rapidity to make it extremely difficult for her to be seen from the earth, as he wanted to see without being seen, and he remained undiscovered until nearly noon. All this time trains had been seen running in swift succession into Moscow from the east and out to the west, evidently conveying troops to the frontier.

A large fleet of air-ships, numbering apparently between two and three hundred vessels, were seen lying in four squadrons on the open space about the Kremlin, and others were constantly flying into and out of the city in all directions.

A few minutes after half-past eleven, Cosmo, after a long look through his glasses, called to Alan, who was looking out from the other side of the deck—

"I fancy they must have seen us at last. Three ships are coming up on this side as if they wanted to investigate."

Alan crossed over and soon picked out the Russian vessels rising in long spiral sweeps from the earth about three miles to the northward and coming up very fast.

"They seem to have learned something in tactics during

the year," he said. "They evidently know better than to rise perpendicularly while they suspect we are up here. They think they'll be much more difficult to hit coming up like that."

"Yes," said Cosma. "But we can soon show them the mistake in that idea. What are you going to do with them?"

"Destroy them, of course," replied Alan. "It doesn't matter about giving the alarm now. I think it's pretty certain that the Russians are going to concentrate at Kieff, Vitebsk, Dünaburg, and Vilna, and those four squadrons down there are intended to cover them. We'd better let them concentrate, and make the fighting as short and sharp as possible. It would be a waste of time to destroy them here in detail, and the moral effect wouldn't be anything like as good. What do you think?"

"I don't think there'll be any fighting," replied Cosmo, "unless between the air-ships. The most hardened troops of the nineteenth century would have broken and run like a lot of sheep under our shells, and these poor fellows, who have never seen a battle in their lives, will do the same.

"I don't believe we shall have any land fighting at all to speak of during the whole war. There will be nothing but massacres from the air on both sides. Still, I think you're both wise and merciful in waiting until you can hit hard, though perhaps from the strictly military point of view we ought to have Moscow in ruins by sundown."

"I won't do that," said Alan, shaking his head decisively. "There are three or four millions of women and children in it who have done no harm, and I'll shed no more blood than I'm obliged to. We had better destroy those fellows, however, before they get too close. You know what to do."

"Very well," said Cosmo. "You'll take the deck, I suppose?"

Alan nodded, and Cosmo saluted and went into the conning-tower. The *Avenger* now altered her course, so that her circling flight took her to the northward, above the three Russian air-ships that were sweeping round and round

so fast that it would have been impossible to train a gun upon them.

As soon as she got over them the *Avenger* quickened her course until she was flying round in the same circles and at the same speed as the Russians. This, of course, made her relatively stationary with regard to them, and it was now possible to take aim. Two of the broadside guns, one on each side, were much shorter than the others, and had been specially constructed for firing almost vertically downwards.

Alan stood by one of these and trained it on the first of the Russian vessels, which were coming up in a spiral line. At the right moment he pressed the button in the breech and released the projectile. The shot struck the Russian amidships. They saw the glass deck of the roof splinter, then the blaze of the explosion flashed out, the air quaked, and the next moment the fragments of the Russian warship were falling back upon the earth.

A second and a third shot followed as the other two came into position, and when Alan looked down towards the city again he saw that the four squadrons had taken the alarm, and were rising from the earth and scattering in all directions. This was just what he wanted, for it relieved him of the scruples which had prevented him from firing on them while they lay within the precincts of the city.

In an instant the crew of the *Avenger* were at their guns, and shell after shell sped on its downward way after the flying ships. Although, under the circumstances, the aim was necessarily hurried, for the captains of the Russian vessels, seeing the terrible disadvantage at which they were placed, had put on their utmost speed, the guns of the *Avenger* were so smartly handled that nearly a score of the Russians were either blown to fragments or crippled before the squadron escaped out of range.

"Well done!" said Alan. "That will teach them to keep a little smarter look-out next time." And then he went on to himself—"I wonder whether *she* was on board one of those that are lying in little pieces down there? I suppose that

would be too good luck to hope for, and yet I don't know, I think her end ought to be something different to that. I wonder what it really will be?"

He ordered his men to cease firing now, and placed the *Avenger* once more in her old position over Moscow, keeping her at a great elevation to guard against surprise from the squadron he had scattered. A few minutes later two airships were reported coming from the south and north. The flash of the sun on their blue hulls proclaimed them friends.

They were the vessels bringing the reports from St. Petersburg and Odessa, and these reports were to the effect that during the whole of the morning trains had been pouring through from the eastward and all the surrounding country towards the Austro-German frontier. Other reports from the westward had been received by the commanders of these two vessels to the effect that the Russian troops were massing along the frontier and seemingly preparing to invade the Federation area from the four points already selected by Alan.

He at once despatched orders by these two courier-vessels to the depôts at Königsberg, Thorn, Breslau, and Budapesth to assemble four squadrons of fifty vessels each, which were to be over the points of concentration at daybreak on the following morning.

These ships were to maintain their greatest possible elevation—that is to say, about three miles and a half—until the sun rose, then if the sky were clear they were to bombard the towns at once from that height; if not they were to use all precautions against surprise in passing through the clouds, and then the commanders were to use their own discretion as to the plan of operation, but Odessa, Kieff, Vitebsk, and Dünaburg were to be destroyed at all hazards as soon as it was certain that the invading forces were concentrated there, and preparing to march eastward.

As soon as these orders had been despatched the *Avenger* left Moscow, and started at full speed for Gibraltar, where she arrived about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Here Alan, after once more inspecting the land batteries

and the aerial defences of this important outpost of the Federation, received news of the annihilation of the four Moslem expeditions, and heartily congratulated Admiral Ernstein on the complete success of his operations.

It was at once apparent that the Sultan would not risk a second loss so enormous as this even if he had sufficient transports left and could persuade any more of his people to brave the terrors of such another sea-fight. This being so, only two alternatives would be open to him, either he must give up all idea of invading Europe by land or sea, or else he must attempt to force the bridges across the Dardanelles and the Straits of Gibraltar, and cross into Europe *viâ* Turkey and Spain.

Both these bridges, the main highways between Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor, were guarded on the European side by batteries of enormous strength, similar to those which guarded the Federation posts in the Mediterranean. They were magnificent structures, each four hundred feet broad, carrying twelve lines of railway as well as carriage drives and promenades, and, once in the hands of the enemy, troops could be poured across them in tens of thousands every hour.

Alan, after a brief conference with Ernstein, decided to pursue the same tactics here as he was going to make use of on the Russian frontier. The bridges were to be left completely open, but their supporting pillars were to be mined with torpedoes, connected by electric wires with the batteries.

If the Sultan attempted to force them, his men were to be allowed to concentrate on the African and Asiatic shores and to occupy the bridges, then the bridges were to be blown up and the forces on the opposite side to be dispersed by the batteries and the air-ships.

The message to the Dardanelles bridge was despatched by telephone over the cables connecting Gibraltar with Candia and Gallipoli, and similar instructions were sent on from Gallipoli to Constantinople, in case any attempt should be made to force the bridge which spanned the Bosphorus.

The Mediterranean patrol was to be maintained as before,

and three air-ships were sent out to reconnoitre the African coast from Ceuta to Port Said during the night, and learn what they could of the Sultan's intentions.

The rest of the evening and the greater part of the night were spent by Alan receiving and answering reports from the northern coast of the Mediterranean, the Russian frontier, and the principal cities of Europe, and in assuring himself that everything was ready, so far as was possible, to meet the storm that must infallibly burst over the Continent within the next few days.

What would have been in the nineteenth century a matter of weeks was now only one of days and hours. The enormously-developed system of intercommunication made transit, even for very large numbers of men and between very distant points, rapid to a degree undreamt of in the present century.

Trains could travel at two hundred miles an hour along the hundreds of quadruple lines which covered the Continent with their gigantic network, aerial cruisers could fly at more than twice this speed, and squadrons of submarine battleships could cleave their silent and invisible way through the ocean depths at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

It was, therefore, almost impossible to tell without certain information where and how the blows of the enemy would be struck, or from how many points the European area of the Federation might be assailed at once, and vast indeed were the responsibilities and anxieties which weighed upon the man whose single brain was the centre of this vast and complicated system of defence, and on whose decisions would depend the safety or the destruction of millions of human beings.

Alan had managed to get four hours' sleep in the afternoon between Moscow and Gibraltar, and he snatched two hours more before midnight. Then he was called, and the *Avenger* was just about to take the air to return to the Russian frontier, so that he might supervise the operations there, when the look-out on the summit of the Rock of Gibraltar saw and answered the Aerian private signal from the sky, and a few minutes later a fleet of more than a hundred air-ships dropped down out of the

darkness and hovered over what is now called the neutral ground between the Rock and Spain.

One of these alighted at the signal station itself. It was the *Isma*, and within three minutes after she had touched the ground Alan was shaking hands with Alexis and asking him what brought him back so soon from the East.

"I have come back because there is nothing much more to do there," said Alexis. "Have you had any fighting here?"

"Yes," said Alan; "or, at anyrate, a big massacre."

And then he described what had befallen the Sultan's expeditions.

"Horrible but necessary, I suppose!" replied Alexis, not without a shudder at the news. "I have been doing my damage on land. I didn't wait for the enemy to begin hostilities, so as soon as day broke we got to work. We have wrecked Ekaterinburg, Slatonsk, Orenburg, and Uralsk, and blocked the four roads into Russia from Asia.

"The Tsarina's Asiatic forces had concentrated there in large numbers ready to come into Europe. We found some air-ships intended to cover them, but we had the best of the elevation, and smashed them up. The slaughter has been something perfectly frightful. I had a hundred and fifty ships in action, and there isn't a man left of the Asiatic troops that is not getting back to where he came from as fast as he can go.

"The towns are mere heaps of ruins and the railways utterly useless. I left twenty ships to patrol the frontier and stop any further movements into Russia, and twenty more are strung out in a line from the Caspian to the head of the Red Sea to cut communications between Asia and Africa.

"We came westward over Odessa this afternoon, and had a skirmish, in which, I am sorry to say, I lost five ships, but we destroyed twenty Russians, blew up the dockyard, and shelled the city by way of punishment. And now I've got myself and a hundred and thirty ships to place at your disposal for the present. There is nothing more to be feared from the East, for by to-morrow night, I think, the Asiatics will be thoroughly terrorised."

"You have done more than I have in the way of slaughter and destruction," said Alan. "But there will be some fearful work along the Russian frontier to-morrow morning. The Tsarina, as you call her, is concentrating her forces at Kieff, Vitebsk, Dunaburg, and Vilna for a descent upon Germany. I have ordered those four places to be destroyed as soon as possible after sunrise, and I am just starting now, so you had better come with me and order your ships to follow us."

Both the commanders felt, as their combined squadrons were winging their way towards the Russian frontier, that the events of the next twenty-four hours or so would go far towards deciding the issues of the war, and therefore the fate of the world.

Alexis had given up the command of the *Isma* for the night to his first lieutenant, and was travelling on board the *Avenger*, in order that he and Alan might finally arrange their plans for the terrible deeds that were to be done on the following day. Both of them were serious almost to depression, for it must be remembered that neither possessed that love of fighting and slaughter which distinguishes the professional soldier of the nineteenth century.

Armed with the most awful weapons ever wielded by human hands, they had already, within the space of a few hours, hurled millions of their fellow-creatures into eternity and made thousands of homes desolate which a couple of days ago were happy. Now they were going to repeat the tragedy, on how vast a scale neither of them knew. Before the next sunset a red line of blood and flame would mark the frontier between Russia and Germany.

All the horrors of months of the older warfare would be concentrated into those few fatal hours. Those who were to do battle in the air would hurl their irresistible lightnings at each other more as gods than as men, while on earth the unresisting swarms could only stand in helpless agony of suspense waiting for the death from which there was no possibility of flying.

Within a hundred miles of the frontier the two fleets stopped, and Alexis went on board his own vessel. It was

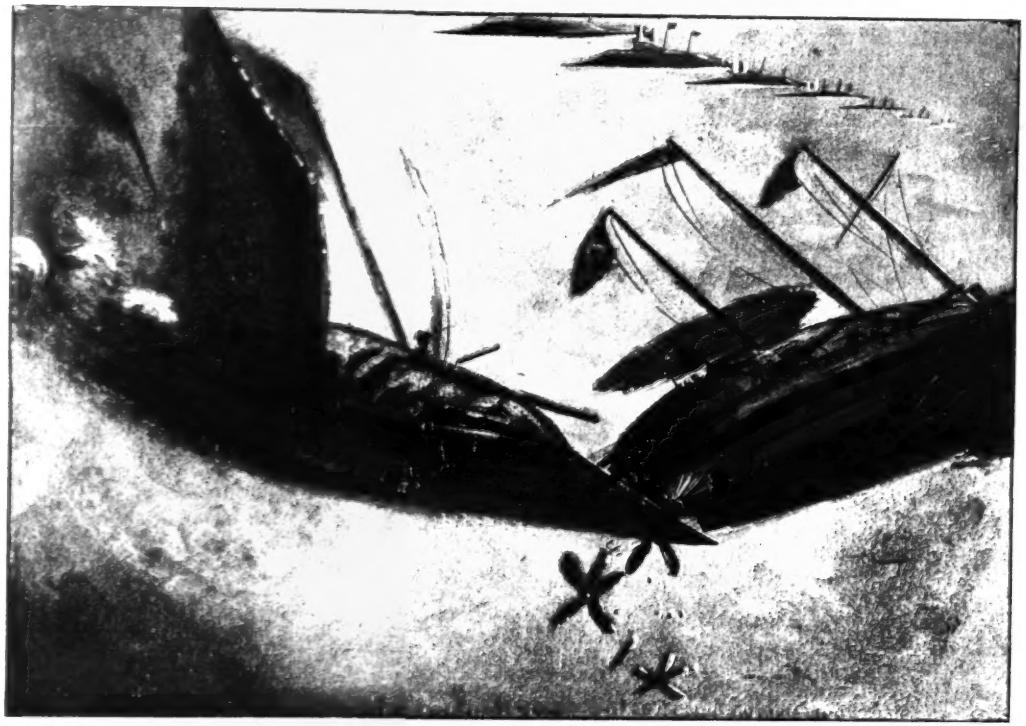
then a few minutes after three in the morning, that is to say, about an hour before sunrise, and the warships were floating in a serene and cloudless atmosphere at an elevation of nearly four miles, or about twenty thousand feet. It was already quite light enough at that elevation for signals to be plainly seen, and a rapid interchange of these took place, communicating the final instructions from the flagships to the commanders of the smaller squadrons into which the fleets were to be divided.

Just as the last signal had been answered, and the vessels were about to separate, a tiny speck of light was seen far away to the westward. A hundred powerful field-glasses were instantly turned upon it, and soon showed it to be a hostile air-ship coming up very fast at an elevation of about three miles. The silvery sheen of her hull instantly betrayed the fact that she was neither an Aerian nor a Federation vessel, for the former were blue and the latter painted dull grey. A moment's reflection showed that she must have sighted the Aerian fleet, and if she got past would take tidings of its presence to the frontier and destroy all hope of a surprise.

Within twenty seconds of her true nature being made out a signal was flying from the mizzenmast of the *Isma*, which read, "Shall I stop her?" "Yes. Cripple her if you can. Don't fire unless necessary," came the reply from the *Avenger*, and the *Isma* at once darted away on her errand.

Alexis, of course, understood that if he struck the enemy with a shell her fragments would fall to the earth, and might probably give the impression that a battle was being fought in the air, and, as they were now so near to the Russian frontier, this was to be avoided if possible. He therefore determined to cripple her without destroying her, and, if he could manage it, to capture her in mid-air, a feat that had never been performed before under similar conditions.

He descended until the *Isma* was only floating about a thousand feet higher than the enemy, and then began to fly round and round in a wide circle, at a speed which made it practically impossible for her to be hit with a shell, save by



THE "ISMA" SWOOPED DOWN.

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the merest chance. The stranger, on sighting the fleet, slowed down and swung round to the northward, so as to have the advantage of being able to present her stern chasers to the enemy.

This gave Alexis the opportunity he wanted. The instant that her stern was visible, the *Isma* swooped down, and rushed at her at such a speed that she looked more like a stream of blue light flashing through the sky than a solid material body. Those on board her saw this flash dart past their stern. Their ship shivered from stem to stern with some shock that came so swiftly that not until the *Isma* was almost out of sight did they realise the damage that had been done.

The ram of the Aerian had cut through the barrels of the two stern guns and the shafts of the three propellers as cleanly as a razor would have divided so many straws. Sustained and propelled only by her wings, she dropped from two hundred miles an hour to about twenty-five, and then the *Isma* reappeared in the sky above her, flying the signal, "Will you surrender?"

Her commander saw that the brilliant and almost miraculous manœuvre of the *Isma* had placed him utterly at her mercy. If he refused, a single shell would send him and his ship and crew in fragments to the earth, while none of his guns could touch the Aerian, floating as she did a thousand feet above him, so he bowed to necessity and sent the white flag to his masthead. Alexis then signalled again, ordering him to unload all his guns and leave the breeches open, and when he had seen this done he sank down to a level with her, passed a steel-wire rope on board her, and towed her away in triumph to the fleet.

The brilliant achievement delighted the Aerians as much as it confounded the crew of the captured vessel, especially when it was discovered that she was the *Haroun*, a Moslem warship taking a message from the Sultan to the Tsarina at Moscow.

Khalid's letter, which had been despatched the night before from Algiers, informed Olga of the disaster that had overtaken the Crescent in the Mediterranean, and of his determination

to avenge it by storming the bridges of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, and the Bosphorus, and pouring his remaining troops over them into Europe as soon as he could concentrate them.

Far more important than this, however, was a notification of his intention to at once lead a fleet of two hundred and fifty air-ships to the west of Europe, and there destroy city after city on his eastward course until they joined forces and proceeded, if necessary, to devastate the rest of the Continent.

The Moslem's guns were now rendered useless, and she was left to her own devices to fall an easy prey to the first enemy that might attack her. The Aerian fleet then divided into fifty squadrons of five vessels each, and these winged their way towards the Russian frontier, ever soaring higher and higher, until their wings were beating the rarefied air at an altitude of over three miles.

Odessa, Kieff, Gomel, Vitebsk, Dünaburg, and Riga were all covered by the time the sun rose. Scores of Russian air-ships were seen by the various squadrons darting about hither and thither along the frontier at varying elevations, evidently on the look-out for an enemy.

It was not many minutes before the Aerian squadrons were discovered by these, and they instantly got away out of range, and then swerving round sought to rise to a similar altitude so as to place themselves on equal terms with the Aerians.

But long before this attempt could be made the work of death had begun, and two thousand guns were raining their projectiles, charged with inevitable destruction, upon the devoted cities. They were swarming with men who had come through the interior of Russia during the night for the invasion of Europe, but there were no troops on land to oppose them, for Alan had seen that there would be no need for these.

Within an hour the six cities were so many vast shambles, and still the relentless rain of death kept falling from the skies. Houses and public buildings crumbled into dust under the terrific impact of the explosions.

The streets were torn up as if by earthquakes, the railways running in and out were utterly wrecked, and the victims of the pitiless attack, panic-stricken and mad with fear and agony, rushed aimlessly hither and thither through the bloody, fire-scorched streets and amidst the falling ruins until inevitable death overtook them and ended their tortures of mind and body.

There was no escape even as there was no mercy. Thousands fled out into the country only to find the same rain of death falling upon the villages. It seemed as though the unclouded heavens of that May morning were raining fire and death from every point upon the devoted earth, and yet no source of destruction was to be seen.

But ere long new horrors were added to the desolation which had already befallen the cities. Terrific explosions burst out high up in the air, vast dazzling masses of flame blazed out, mocking the sunlight with their brightness, and then vanishing in an instant, and after them came showers of bits of metal and ragged fragments of human bodies, all that remained of some great cruiser of the air and her crew.

The Russian squadrons, numbering in all about three hundred warships, by flying several miles to the eastward and then doubling on a constantly ascending course had by this time gained a sufficient elevation to train their guns upon the Aerians, and as soon as they had done this the aerial battle became general along a curved line more than a thousand miles in length, extending from Odessa to Riga.

George Cosmo had been right when he said that there would be little or no land fighting, for along that line, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, there was scarcely a man left alive by midday who was not mad with fear and horror at the frightful effects of the aerial assault.

On land as well as on sea fighting was impossible. Armies and fleet could exist only in the absence of the air-ships, and they were everywhere. Cities lay utterly at their mercy, and nothing shaped by the hand of man could withstand the impact of their projectiles.

But all day long the fight went on in the skies above the Russian frontier, yet not at all after the fashion imagined by the poet of the nineteenth century, who wrote, as he thought prophetically, of

> Airy navies grappling in the central blue.

The first and chief endeavour of the captain of every vessel was to avoid the shots of his opponents and to get his own home. It was brains and machinery pitted against brains and machinery, and grappling was never thought of.

The air-ship which could gain and maintain a greater elevation than her opponent infallibly destroyed her, and so, too, did the one that could fly unhurt at full speed along the line of battle and use her stern guns upon those which became relatively stationary enough for her to take aim at them.

It would have been a magnificent spectacle for an observer who could have followed the contending squadrons in their swift and complicated evolutions. He would have seen the blue and the silver hulls flashing to and fro as though apparently engaged in some harmless trial of speed, then, without the slightest warning, without a puff of smoke or the faintest sound of a report, the long, deadly guns would do their work.

The moment of vantage would come, and the silent and invisible messengers of annihilation would be sped upon their way; then, with a roar and a shock that convulsed the firmament, a mist of flame would envelop the ship that had been struck, and when it vanished she would have vanished too, falling in a rain of fragments towards the earth nearly twenty thousand feet below.

It was a battle not so much for victory as for destruction. There could be no victory save to those who survived after having annihilated their enemies, and this was the sole object of the struggle. High in air above the contending squadrons, the *Avenger* and the *Isma* swept to and fro along the line, raised by their superior soaring powers beyond the zone of battle, and from their decks the two admirals com-

manded the fight, and, like very Joves above the tempest, hurled their destroying bolts from their terrible guns far and wide over the scene of strife.

From morning to night both Alan and Alexis sought in vain for the blue hull of the *Revenge* among the Russian squadron. Unless Olga was on board one of the other ships she was either engaged in some work of destruction elsewhere or was directing the operations of her forces and learning the disasters that had overtaken them in her palace in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

It had been previously ordered that, as soon as it became too dark to take accurate aim with the guns, those vessels of the Aerian fleet which had survived the battle were to fly westward and rendezvous at midnight on the summit of the Schneekoppe, one of the peaks of the Giant Mountains to the north-east of Bohemia, whence, as soon as the amount of damage had been ascertained, the remainder of it, if strong enough, was to set out and if possible intercept the Moslem fleet before it could form a junction with the Russians.

When the last vessel had alighted on the summit of the mountain it was found that out of a fleet numbering two hundred and fifty warships only a hundred and eighty remained—the rest were scattered in undistinguishable fragments along the Russian frontier. As for the amount of damage that had been done to the enemy as a set-off to this heavy loss, the Aerian commanders could form no even approximate estimate of it.

All they knew was that the six frontier cities, and a score or so of smaller towns and villages, were now mere heaps of ruins, vast charnel-houses choked with unnumbered corpses. The Russian army of invasion must have been practically annihilated, and certainly its remnants would be too hopelessly demoralised by the unspeakable horrors it had survived to be of the slightest use for further fighting.

As soon as the roll had been called, the fleet, in two squadrons of ninety vessels each, took the air and crossed the mountains to Gorlitz, which had been selected a year before as

a convenient spot for the establishment of an arsenal and power-station, standing as it does at the angle of intersection of two great mountains which form the natural bulwarks of Bohemia.

Here the stock of motive-power and the ammunition of all the vessels were renewed, and at daybreak the squadrons were just about to take the air when a telephonic message was received from Paris that a large fleet of air-ships had appeared above the city and had begun to bombard it. This message had been sent in compliance with a system of intercommunication which Alan had instituted between all the great cities of Europe, and all the power-stations and rendezvous throughout the Continent.

The moment an enemy appeared over any town messages were to be sent to all the stations simultaneously, and detachments of warships were to be despatched to the threatened point as soon as the warning was received.

It will be seen that this system would enable a very large force to be concentrated upon any threatened point, and, in fact, before the sun was two degrees above the horizon of Paris, eight squadrons of Federation warships, including the two under the command of Alan and Alexis, were flying at full speed from all four points of the compass towards the city which for over half a century had been the acknowledged capital of the Continent.

Little more than an hour sufficed for the *Avenger* and the *Isma* to pass over the six hundred miles which separated Gorlitz from Paris. Flying at their utmost speed they left their squadrons to follow the two admirals, knowing that every captain could be implicitly trusted to do the work allotted to his ship without further orders.

The object of Alan and Alexis was to get first to the scene of action, and to avail themselves of the superior soaring powers of their two vessels to deliver an assault upon the Moslems which they could not reply to.

A fearful scene unfolded itself before them as they swept up out of the eastward over Paris. The vast and splendid

city was surrounded by a huge circle formed of at least two hundred Moslem warships floating at an elevation of some three miles, and pouring a tempest of projectiles from hundreds of guns indiscriminately into the area crowded with stately buildings and nearly ten millions of inhabitants.

Nearly three miles above the centre of the city floated a solitary scout-ship ready to signal warning of the approach of an enemy. Fires were already raging in hundreds of places all over the city. The streets were swarming with terrified throngs of citizens who had rushed out to escape the flames and the falling buildings, only to meet the hundreds of shells that were constantly bursting among them, rending their bodies to fragments by scores at a time.

Such was the beginning of Khalid the Magnificent's revenge for the disaster of the Mediterranean—a vengence which proved that, in his breast at least, the savage spirit of the ancient warfare was still untamed.

The *Avenger* and the *Isma* gained an altitude of four miles above the doomed city, half a dozen shells from their guns struck the scout-ship and reduced her to dust before she had time to make a signal in warning, and then the forty-four guns began to send a radiating hail of projectiles upon the Moslem fleet. Shell after shell found its mark in spite of the vast range, and ship after ship collapsed and dropped in fragments or blew up like a huge shell.

But before the fifth round had been fired a strange thing happened. A single Aerian warship rushed up at full speed out of the south, and as soon as she sighted the *Avenger* signalled, "Orders from the Council. Come alongside." The new-comer soared upwards as they sank to meet her, and the three ships met and stopped some three miles and a half above the earth. The stern of the *Azrael*, as the messenger-ship was named, was brought close up to that of the *Avenger*, the deck doors were opened, a gangway thrown across, and the captain boarded the flagship and placed a sealed despatch in Alan's hand.

He opened it, and to his unspeakable astonishment read—

AERIA, May 16th, 6 P.M.

All Aerians are to return at once with their ships to Aeria, and take no further part in the fighting. The Federation fleets may be left in the hands of foreign crews and commanders, to whom the power-stations and batteries are to be given up. This order is to be obeyed with the least possible delay.

ALAN ARNOLD, President.

To the Admirals in command of the Federation Fleets.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MESSAGE FROM MARS.

IN order to adequately explain the origin of the peremptory recall which, although of course he obeyed it without question, seemed so incomprehensible to Alan, it will be necessary to go back to the night of the 12th of May.

While all Aeria was rejoicing over the return of the exiles and their restoration to the rights of citizenship, there was one of the inhabitants of the Valley who took little or no part in the festivities. This was Vassilis Cosmo, a man of between forty-six and forty-seven, and elder brother of the George Cosmo who had been chief engineer of the *Narwhal*, and was now first officer of the *Avenger*.

A striking distinction of personality and temperament had, ever since he had reached a thinking age, marked him as one apart from the rest of his fellow-countrymen.

He had little or none of the gaiety of disposition and social cordiality that were the salient characteristics of the Aerians as a people. He was serious almost to taciturnity, solitary and studious, and wholly engrossed in a single pursuit—the study of astronomy in its bearing on the great problem of interplanetary communication.

After twenty years of constant labour, assisted by all the knowledge and inventive progress which had placed the Aerians so far ahead of the rest of the world, he had at length solved this problem and realised the dream of ages six years

before Olga Romanoff had dropped her defiance from the skies.

As yet, however, his success had been confined to one planet, and this, as will have been learnt from the conversation between Alma and Isma on that memorable night on which Alan's letter had been received from the island, was the planet Mars.

After infinite toil and innumerable failures, he had at length succeeded in establishing an intelligible system of what may here be described as photo-telegraphy, in which the rays of light passing between the earth and Mars were made to perform the functions of the electric wires in modern telegraphy.

His alphabet, so to speak, consisted of a hundred great electric suns disposed at equal intervals on the mountain peaks round the great oval of the Valley. These were in direct communication with the observatory of Aeria, which was situated at a height of sixteen thousand feet on Mount Austral, the highest of the two snow-capped peaks which stood at the southern end of the Valley.

A single switch key enabled him, when sitting by the huge telescope which embodied all the highest optical science of Aeria, to light and extinguish these brilliant globes as he chose, and it was by lighting and extinguishing them at certain intervals that he was able to transmit his signals to the Martian astronomer, who was waiting to receive them, and to reply to them by similar means across the gulf of thirty-four million miles which separates the two planets at their nearest approach to each other.

Momentous as were the events of the last few days, they were dwarfed to utter insignificance by the irregular and apparently meaningless recurrences of a tiny point of light in the centre of a great concave mirror situated at the base of the huge barrel of the telescope, through the side aperture of which Vassilis Cosmo was looking a few minutes before midnight on that memorable 12th of May

The point of light appeared and vanished, and reappeared

again at irregular intervals, which the astronomer noted on an automatic registering instrument beside him. The moment the flash appeared he pressed a button, which he held down till it disappeared, then he released it, waited till the flash reappeared, and repeated the operation so long as the signals came.

For nearly five hours he received and registered the signals recorded by his reflector in silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the clockwork which, working synchronously with the movements of the two orbs, kept the image of Mars exactly in the centre of the object-glass, and by the soft whirring of the registering instrument.

Never before had human eyes read such a message as he read, sitting that night in silence and solitude in his observatory amid the snows, far above the lovely valley in which his countrymen were still holding high revel.

Well might his hands tremble and his eyes grow dim with something more than long watching when he reversed the mechanism of the register and a narrow slip of paper, divided by cross-lines into equal spaces a tenth of an inch long, issued from a slit in one end, and began to run slowly over a revolving drum.

On the tape was a series of straight black lines running longitudinally along it. They were of unequal length, and divided from each other by unequal spaces. Before the exact import of the message could be gained the length of each of these lines, and that of the space which separated it from the next, had to be accurately measured, but Vassilis knew his own code so perfectly that he had been able to read the general drift of the communication that had been sent along the light-rays from the sister world by approximately guessing the duration of the flashes and the intervals between them.

Day was beginning to dawn by the time the long tape had been unrolled and pinned down in equal lengths on a board for measuring. For more than five hours he had not uttered a syllable or even an exclamation, although he had received from another world what appeared to be tantamount, not

only to his own death-sentence, but to that of the whole human race.

But when the slips were at length pinned out and he had run his practised eye deliberately over the fatal marks, his white lips parted and a deep groan broke from his chest. He was alone in the observatory, or perhaps not even this sign of emotion would have escaped him.

With his hands pressed to his temples as though his brain were reeling under the frightful intelligence that had just been conveyed to it, he stood in front of the board and gasped in short, broken sentences—

"God of mercy, can that be really true! Has the world only four months more to live? Surely I have made some mistake—and yet everything has worked as usual. There has been no hitch. It has been a splendid night for transmission and they—no, they had not made a mistake for a thousand years, they are past it. It must—but no, I can do nothing more this morning. I should go mad if I did. I must think of it quietly and sleep a little if I can, and then I will transcribe it."

He left the telescope tower and went out on to a little platform at the rear of the observatory which commanded a view of the whole Valley. He looked out over the lovely landscape lying calm and silent beneath the paling stars, and involuntarily exclaimed aloud—

"Is it for this that we have conquered the earth and bridged the abysses of space—for this that we have made ourselves as gods among men and throned ourselves here in this lovely land, lords of the world and masters of the nations?

"How shall I tell them down yonder? And yet, has not the Master told them already: 'His shape shall be that of a flaming fire.' 'Your children of the fifth generation shall behold his approach'? Yes, the two exiles we welcomed back last night are the fifth generation from the Angel, and *that* will truly be a flaming fire, and truly it will go hard with this world and the men of it in the hour of its passing, as the Master has said."

After a vain attempt to seek refuge from his thoughts in sleep he boarded his aerial yacht and went to the city to mingle with the merry-makers, more for appearance' sake than from inclination, but he kept his own counsel strictly, for more reasons than one. The next night, as soon as Mars was high enough in the heavens, about half-past ten, the dwellers in the Valley saw the great lights on the mountain tops flash out and darken at irregular intervals time after time and hour after hour, until all but those in the sentinel ships went to rest, saying—

"Vassilis is talking to our neighbours in Mars. He will have something to tell us to-morrow."

But when the next day came he had nothing to tell. He had spent the night repeating the message, sign for sign and word for word, and asking for confirmation lest he should have made any mistake in receiving it. Then in agonised anxiety he had waited for the reply on which he now felt the fate of mankind depended. It came with a terrible clearness and brevity, which left no room for doubt—

"Message read correctly. There is no error in our calculations. Terrestrial humanity is doomed, and must prepare to meet its fate."

So far as he was concerned he was satisfied. He knew that a mistake was impossible to the finished science of the Martian astronomers, compared with whom he was but as a little child in knowledge. But still he kept his own counsel, for there was no need for him to cast the sudden shadow of death over the rejoicings of his countrymen.

At length the fleets departed, and Aeria, armed at all points, was awaiting the possible onslaught of her foes. These she would doubtless hurl back in triumphant disdain from her bulwarks, but far, far away in the depths of space, beyond even the range of the great equatorial on Mount Austral, there was approaching an enemy whose assault men could only meet with resignation or despair, as the case might be. Resistance was as much out of the question as escape.

Early on the morning of the 16th, soon after the *Avenger*

had struck the first blow in the world-war, Vassilis presented himself at the President's palace and asked for an interview with him.

The President received him a few minutes later in his private room. It was the first time in his life that the silent, reserved astronomer had ever asked for an official interview, and as the President entered the room he held out his hand, saying—

"Good morning, Vassilis. We have seen very little of you lately, even less than usual. Have you come to see me about the work which has kept you from joining in the general rejoicings? I'm sure it must have been very important."

"Yes, President, it was—the most important that a terrestrial student of astronomy could be engaged upon," replied Vassilis, speaking slowly and very gravely.

The President looked curiously for a moment into his clear, thoughtful eyes, and noticed the lines of care on his pale, worn features, so different to those of the rest of his countrymen. Then he said, with an anxious ring in his voice—

"What is the matter, Vassilis? You look worn and ill, as though you had just passed through some great sorrow. Have you been keeping too long vigils with the stars? Tell me, what is it?"

Vassilis was silent for a moment as though he might have been wondering whether the President, strong as he was, would have strength to bear the blow that he must strike in his next sentence. The awful news had come to him slowly, sign by sign and word by word, and so he had been in a measure prepared for it when its full meaning became clear. But upon Alan Arnold it must fall at a single stroke. Still the words had to be spoken, and after a good minute's pause he said—

"President, I bring you the most terrible news that one man can bring to another. The Master's prophecy is about to be fulfilled. Three nights ago I received through the photo-telegraph what I believe to be the death-sentence of humanity upon earth. Here is the transcript of the message."

Save for a sudden pallor and a quick uplifting of the eyelids, Alan Arnold betrayed no more emotion as he took the roll of paper which Vassilis handed to him, than he had done when he received his son's letter from the island.

"It does not come to me unexpected," he said in his firm quiet tones. "Your children and mine, Vassilis, are of the fifth generation, and it was foretold that they should see the sign in the sky. And so the threatened doom is not to pass us by?"

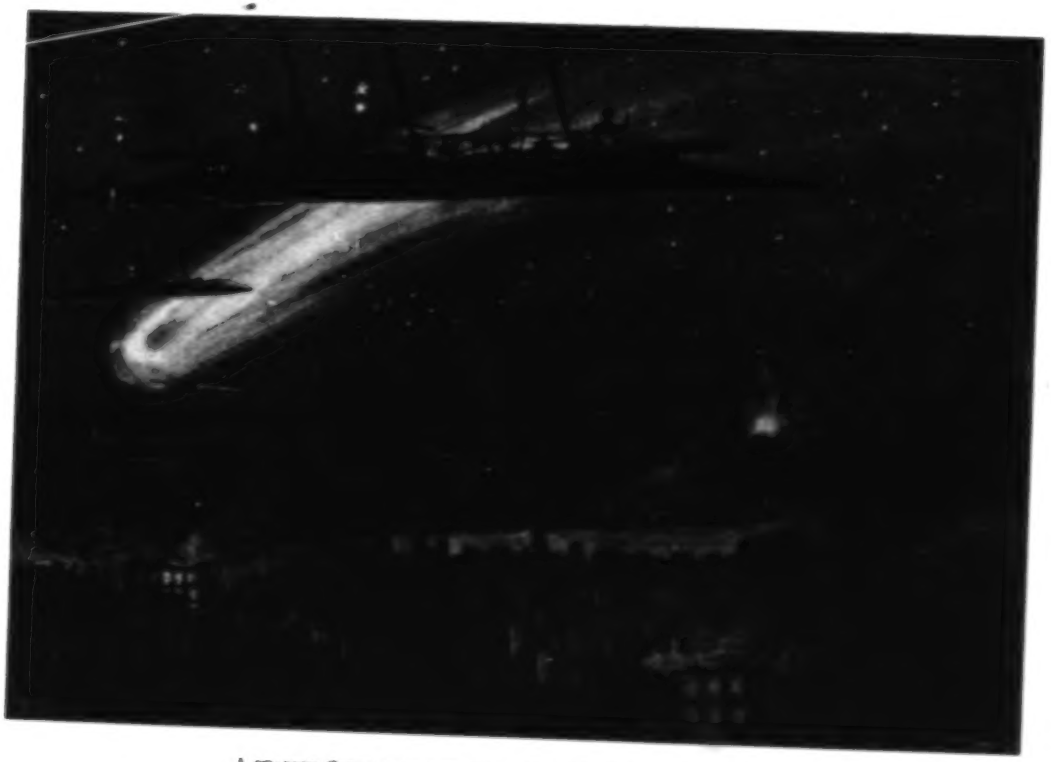
"No," replied Vassilis. "Not unless some miracle happens, and there are no miracles in the astronomy or the mathematics of Mars. The Martians are long past the age of miracles or mistakes. These are the data and the calculations upon which the conclusion is based. I have repeated them back to Mars and received confirmation of them.

"I have also verified the times and distances and velocities myself, and have been unable to find the slightest error. As far as I can see, there is not the remotest chance of escape. The human race has only four months, five days, and twenty-three hours to live from midnight to-night."

"It is the will of God!" said the President solemnly, slightly bending his head as he spoke. "It is not for us to question the designs of Eternal Wisdom, save in so far as we may strive to understand them. Death has always been inevitable to all of us, and this will only be dying together instead of alone. Do you wish anything done with these calculations?"

"Yes," said Vassilis. "I would suggest that you appoint a committee of our best mathematicians and astronomers to examine and verify them once more, detail by detail, so that assurance may, if possible, be made surer. I shall receive another message from Mars to-night, and it will be well for the committee to be with me in the observatory. With the public aspect of the question I have, of course, nothing to do, that lies in the hands of yourself and the Council."

"Very well," said the President, "what you wish shall be done at once, and the Council will meet this morning to consider what public steps are to be taken."



A FEARFUL SCENE UNFOLDED ITSELF AS THEY SWEPT UP OVER PARIS.

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Within half an hour after the conclusion of the momentous interview the Council had met, and the most immediate result of its deliberations on the tremendous tidings that had come from the sister world was the issue of the order for the instant return of all Aerians who were abroad—which had been delivered to Alan on the deck of the *Avenger* on the morning of the 18th.

Immediately on receiving his father's letter, Alan signalled, "Cease firing and follow," to the *Isma*, and the three Aerian vessels started southward towards Gibraltar, leaving Paris to its fate. At Gibraltar, which was reached in two hours and a half, he found that, in accordance with the orders of the Council, messages had already been sent out to all the stations within the European area of the Federation for all Aerians to rendezvous at the Rock as soon as possible.

The same orders had been transmitted along the telephonic cables which connected the marine stations of the Mediterranean for all the battleships on service to go into their respective harbours, so that their crews might land and be picked up by air-ships which had already been despatched for them.

Before the evening Aerian vessels had begun to come in from all parts of Europe, where they had been stationed, and their crews brought terrible descriptions of the scenes of carnage and destruction they had left to obey the summons. The Federation leaders were in despair at their apparent desertion by their potent allies, while their enemies were already rejoicing at the disappearance of the Aerian warships from all points of the scene of war.

By midnight the last Aerian vessel had come in, and, after the command of the Rock, the last station of which the Aerians retained command, had been handed over to the British forces, the flotilla, numbering nearly four hundred warships, rose into the air just as two large Moslem squadrons, one fresh from the destruction of Paris, and the other from Alexandria and the east of Europe, converged upon the Rock, and, without warning, opened a furious fire of shells upon it. The great guns from the batteries replied, and the fleets, under the command of Alan

and Alexis, after sending a rapid hail of shells among the Moslem vessels as a parting salute, soared into the upper regions of the air and headed southward for home, leaving a fiery chaos of death and destruction behind them.

Two hours after daybreak on the 19th the fleet crossed the Northern Ridge, and sank to earth on the sloping plateau behind the city. Alan at once disembarked, and went to his father's palace to report himself.

The sudden and unexpected return of the fleet, which had left to do battle for the empire of the world but three days and a half before, filled all the inhabitants of the Valley with amazement, for no one outside the Council and the committee appointed to verify the message received from Mars yet knew of the doom that was menacing the world.

Alan was received at the door of his palace by his father, who, after their greetings had been exchanged, took him at once to the room in which the Council were already assembled, and there in the presence of his colleagues made him acquainted with the reason for his recall.

Inured as he was to the unsparing warfare in which human life had to be counted as almost a negligible quantity, a warfare in which there was no middle course between life and death, Alan, after the first shock of surprise and horror had passed, faced the tremendous crisis with a calmness and resignation worthy of the traditions of his family and his race.

For years he had carried his life in his hands, and now that the end of all things seemed near he was prepared to look inevitable death calmly in the face. He heard the reading of the message in silence, and then, when he saw that they were waiting for him to speak, he said quietly—

"What is to be must be! We cannot argue with the workings of the universe." Then he paused for a moment, and went on—"I have come back with my comrades in obedience to orders. May I now ask why, if death is coming to the whole human race, we were not permitted to die in battle for the right against the wrong rather than to wait here in inaction and suspense until we are burnt to death on the funeral pyre of the world?"

He spoke the last words almost hotly, for the first thought that had risen in his mind after hearing the doom that was about to overtake humanity was that the debt he owed to Olga Romanoff must now for ever remain unpaid at his hands. This thought was so unbearable to him that before any reply could be made to his question he broke out again, this time speaking rapidly and almost angrily—

"If, as you tell me, the world has only a few weeks to live, why should I wait here for death when I have work to do elsewhere? What does it matter whether I die scorched to a cinder in the fire-mist or am blown to pieces by a Russian shell? I have a debt to pay, a stain upon my honour and my manhood to wipe out before I die.

"And so, too, has Alexis. Will you not give us an air-ship and let us find a crew of volunteers that we may go back to the war and hunt our enemy, and the enemy of humanity, down, and either destroy her or find an honourable death in the attempt to do so?"

As he ended his impassioned appeal his father rose from his seat, and laid his hand upon his shoulder and said gravely, and yet not without a note of admiration in his voice—

"My son, those are brave and honourable words, and they prove that you are no unworthy son of the race you belong to. But they are still the words of passion rather than reason. Remember that in the presence of the universal doom that now overhangs the human race not only private vengeance but even the strife of nations sinks into utter insignificance. A heavier hand than yours will punish the sin for which she who has wronged you will soon have to answer at the bar of Eternal Justice. Remember how it was said of old, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will repay.'"

"That is true, father," replied Alan, now speaking in his habitual tone of respect. "But why should not the instrument of that vengeance be the hand of him whom she has so bitterly wronged? You know what I mean, and so do all in this room.

"Has she not so polluted my manhood and stained my honour that I must meet, apart from Alma, the fate that I could

have shared with her with no more regret than that we had to die instead of live together? Is it not better that she should know I died in the attempt to wipe that stain away than see me waiting for death with it still upon me?"

"That is for Alma as well as for you to decide," said Francis Tremayne, rising from his seat as he spoke. "How do you know that she is unwilling to meet her end hand-in-hand with you?"

"I have looked into her eyes and seen no love in them," replied Alan, flushing to his temples with shame and anger. "Her old love for me is dead, as it may well be. How could I expect her purity to mate with my"—

"Stop, Alan!" exclaimed his father before he had time to utter the shameful word that was on his lips. "Those are no words for you to speak or for me to hear, especially at such a time as this. If any stain ever rested upon you you have more than purged it already. The man who is found worthy the confidence of the rulers of Aeria is worthy the respect, if not the love, of any woman in the State. Whether Alma loves you still or not is a question for her own heart to answer, but you must not call yourself unworthy in my hearing."

"Nor yet in mine," said Alma's father warmly. "If the shadow of death had not fallen across all our life-ways as it has done, there is no man who wears the Golden Wings that I would so willingly see Alma join hands with as yourself. If I, her father, hold you worthy to live with her, surely you cannot hold yourself unworthy to die with her."

As he spoke he held out his hand to Alan, and he, unable to find words to answer him, grasped it in silence, broken only by a murmur of approval from the assembled members of the Council.

"Thank you, my friend, for saying that!" said the President to Tremayne. "Alan can ask no better assurance unless he has it from Alma's own lips. But now I have something more to say, something that will give the true reason for my recall of all the Aerians who were beyond our borders. Let the words you are now going to hear be heard with all respect, for they are not mine but those of the Master himself."

Amidst an expectant silence he now resumed his place at the head of the Council table, and bidding Alan and the Vice-President to be seated, took a long parchment envelope brown with age from the breast of his tunic and said—

"This contains the last words of him who prophesied the doom with which humanity now stands confronted, and who thus speaks to us from the past, and gives us good counsel and comfort in the hour of our perplexity and sorrow. It has been handed down with its seal unbroken from father to son for four generations, and now it has fallen to me to break the seal and read what no eyes but those of Natas and my own have ever seen. This is the endorsement upon the cover—

'To the son or daughter of my line who shall be the head of the House of Arnold in the fifth generation from me:—When the world is threatened with the final ruin that I have foreshadowed, open this and read my words to all who are then dwelling in Aeria. NATAS.'"

The President paused, and everyone waited with most anxious expectation as he opened the envelope and took from it four square sheets of parchment. He unfolded them and went on—

"When Vassilis Cosmo brought me the transcription of the message from Mars I saw that the time had come to obey the injunction endorsed on this envelope. I opened it, and this is what I read:—

'The interpretation of the prophecy concerning the possible destruction of the world in the fifth generation from now, written by me in the twenty-fifth year of the Peace, and commanded to be read every fifth year in the ears of the descendants of those now dwelling in Aeria.

'When the War of the Terror was over, and there was peace on earth, I devoted the declining years of my life to the study of that noblest of all sciences which teaches the lore of the stars and the constitution of the universe. In the fifteenth year of the Peace, that is to say, in the year of the Christian Era 1920, a new star appeared towards the constellation of Andromeda, which shone with great brilliancy for thirty-five nights, and then faded gradually away into the abysses of space.

'Seeking into the causes of this phenomenon, I found that it was due to the collision of two opaque bodies beyond the bounds of the solar system, which doubtless had been travelling towards each other for centuries through space. So enormous was the heat evolved by the conversion of the motion of the two bodies, that their materials were resolved into their component elements, and what had been two bodies as solid as the earth, though immensely larger,

now became an enormous fire-mist, a chaos of blazing storms and burning billows of incandescent matter.

'I observed it closely from the time of its first appearance until the most powerful telescope at my command could no longer detect it. I found that, vastly remote as it was, the course which it pursued until it was lost to view proved that it was still within the sphere of the sun's attraction, and that therefore a time must come when it would reach its point of greatest distance, and return.

'Such calculations as I was able to make during the brief period of my observation, showed that it would re-enter the confines of the solar system in one hundred and twelve years from then, and, travelling with constantly accelerated motion, would become visible to the inhabitants of the earth five years later. I learnt, too, that unless it should be deflected from its path by the attraction of bodies unknown to terrestrial astronomers it would cross the orbit of the earth in the month of September in the year 2037, that is to say, in the fifth generation of men from my own day.

'If my calculations are correct, the earth will during that month pass through an ocean of fire that will destroy all living things upon its surface, both plants and animals.

'For the space of ten hours, or, it may well be, more, while the planet is passing through the fire-mist, there will be no water upon the face of the earth, but the whole globe will be surrounded with a vast nebulous mantle of steam. At the end of this time it will emerge from the fiery sea, the steam-cloud will be recondensed and fall in a deluge upon the land, and the world, with a changed face, with new oceans and new continents, will pursue her impassive way, lifeless, through space.

'But even in the face of so tremendous a cataclysm as this, it is not for human genius to despair or human faith to be confounded. The new earth may be repeopled, and you may be the parents of the new humanity. Though innumerable millions shall die, yet the chosen few will be saved, if the Master of Destiny shall permit, and from among you the chosen few shall come.

'The caverns of Mount Austral are deep and cool, and enclosed by walls of living rock, deep rooted in the foundations of the world. In those days, if you shall have made good use of the heritage we leave you, you shall be almost as gods in skill and knowledge, and you shall find a means to make this a fortress whose strength shall defy the convulsions of the elements and preserve a remnant of human life upon the earth.

'When you have done this, you that remain shall prepare to meet the inevitable end, for only a few among your many thousands can be saved. Yet, if you have grown in wisdom and faith as well as in knowledge and skill, you shall not disquiet yourselves about this, for sooner or later death is certain to all, and you will but pass together through the shadows instead of singly.

'When the final hour comes, and the breath of the blazing firmament is hot upon your brows, may He in whose Hand the fate of worlds and races lies, give you strength and wisdom to compose yourselves for death as men who know that it is but the dreamless sleep that parts to-morrow from to-day.'

"Those are the words of the Master," said the President, reverently laying down the parchment sheets on the table

before him. "And it is for us to hear and obey. You will now see why it was necessary for all our sons that had gone forth to battle to be recalled, for among them there are many who can justly lay claim to be of the flower of Aerian manhood.

"To-morrow I will read the message from Mars and the commands of the Master, in the temple, to a congregation of all the fathers and mothers in Aeria, and then it shall be their task to prepare their children for the doom which awaits them in common with the rest of humanity. The remainder of to-day we will devote to the task of considering how the commands of the Master may be best obeyed."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SENTENCE OF DEATH.

AT ten o'clock on the following morning the great temple of Aeria was filled by a congregation of men and matrons who had been summoned together to hear what may, without exaggeration, be described as the death-sentence of the world and the funeral oration of the human race.

As had been previously decided by the President and Council, only the heads of families were present. Of these, some had but just welcomed their first-born into the world, while others, standing almost on the brink of the grave, could see their children of the fourth generation growing up from infancy to youth.

When the President commenced his address by reading in solemnly impressive tones the prophecy of Natas, those present knew instinctively what they had been called together to hear. The possibility of the world being overwhelmed by some tremendous catastrophe in the fifth generation from the year of the Peace was no new or unawaited prospect to the Aerians.

Therefore there was no panic, no sudden outburst of sorrow or dismay, among the grave, earnest congregation assembled in the temple when the President, having read the prophecy, went on to say—

"It is now my solemn duty as Chief Magistrate of Aeria to tell you, the heads of the families of our race, that, in the

mysterious workings of destiny, which we can only accept with reverence and resignation, the time has come for us to prepare to meet, with the fortitude worthy of our position among the races of mankind, the doom which is as inevitable as it is universal. The confirmation of the prophecy of Natas has come to us across the abysses of space from one of those sister worlds which, as the Master said, should see with fear and trembling the passing of the messenger of Fate.

"On the night of Tuesday last, Vassilis Cosmo received from the planet Mars a photogrammic message, the transcription of which into our language reads thus—

'A cometary body, primarily formed by the meeting of two extinguished astral spheres at 10 hrs. 38 min. 42 sec. on the night of the 13th of October, in the year 1920, terrestrial reckoning, will cross the orbit of the earth at 11 hrs. 55 min. 22 sec. on the night of the 23rd of September next, time corrected to the meridian of Aeria.

'At this hour the earth will arrive at the point of intersection, and will pass obliquely through the central portion or nucleus of the body. This portion is composed of incandescent metallic gases interspersed with semi-fluid masses, which on contact with the earth's atmosphere will probably be vaporised.

'The constituents of the incandescent nucleus are iron, gold, tellurium, chromium, oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon, with smaller quantities of many other substances which spectrum analysis will disclose to you on the appearance of the comet which will become visible from Aeria at 8 hrs. 13 min. P.M. on the 15th of July, when its right ascension will be 15 hrs. 24 min. 17 sec., and its declination north 10 deg. 42 min. 17 sec. Here follow the detailed calculations upon which the foregoing conclusions are based.'

"With these calculations," continued the President, "this is neither the time nor the place to deal, for I know that all here will be satisfied when I say that for the last three days they have been submitted to the critical examination of our best astronomers and mathematicians, and that not the slightest flaw has been found in them.

"This being so, the only course left open to us as reasonable beings is to prepare to look the inevitable in the face, and to play our part in the closing scene of the life-drama of humanity as men and women who believe that the life we are living here is but a stage on our journey through infinity, and that the fiery sign which will soon appear in the heavens will

be to us but a beacon light on the ultimate shore of Time casting a guiding ray over the ocean of Eternity."

He paused for a moment and looked down upon the hushed throng at his feet. The instantaneous silence was broken by a long, low, inarticulate murmur. Thousands of pale faces were upturned towards him, from thousands of eyes there came one appealing upward glance, and then every head in the great assembly was bowed in silence and resignation.

The death-sentence had been passed. There was no appeal from it, and there was no rebellion against it. The voice of Fate had spoken, and it was not for such men as the Aerians to sacrifice their reason or their dignity by cavilling at it.

The President bent his head with the rest, and for several moments there was silence throughout the vast area of the temple. Then he took up from the desk in front of the rostrum the four sheets of parchment which contained the last message and commands of Natas, and read them out to the assembly.

The perusal was listened to in breathless silence. It was like his voice speaking across the generations from the urn containing his ashes and standing there in their midst. When the President had finished, he laid the sheets down again and said—

"Thus the eye of the Master, looking across the years which separated his day from ours, has seen one gleam of light, one ray of hope piercing the black pall of desolation which is about to fall upon the world, and it is for us to follow where he has pointed the way.

"I have now discharged the first part of the solemn and terrible duty which has devolved upon me. It is now for you to communicate the tidings you have heard to your families, a task which, however awful it may be for loving parents to be charged with, you will yet find strength to perform, even as your children shall find strength to hear their inevitable doom from those lips which will best know how to soften the tidings of death to them.

"When you have done this we will set about making the

choice of those who, if it shall please the Master of Destiny, shall be the Children of Deliverance and the parents of the new race that shall repeople the earth when cosmos once more succeeds to chaos.

"If that shall be permitted, then we, who shall never see the new world, may yet go down to the grave knowing that we shall live again in our children, for these will be the children, not only of a few families among us, but sons and daughters of Aeria, the most perfect flower of our race, and in them, if we choose them wisely, the world, purged by fire of the dross of human wickedness, will find a new destiny, and the Golden Age shall return to earth once more."

As the President finished speaking, he held up his hands as though in blessing, and once more every head was bent. Then the great doors of the temple swung open, the assembly divided into four streams, and passed silently as a congregation of shadows out of the building.

That night the story of the world's approaching doom was told in every home in Aeria. Children on the threshold of youth learnt that for them youth would never come; youths and maidens on the verge of manhood and womanhood learnt that the bright promise of their lives could now never be fulfilled; and lovers just about to join hands for life saw the grave opening at their feet, and parting them in their earthly personalities for ever. That they would meet again upon a higher plane of existence was the first and most firmly held article of their faith, but so far as the affairs of this world were concerned the end was in sight.

In a less highly developed, a less perfectly organised, state of society, the almost immediate result would have been the end of all control, and the dissolution of all but the most elementary bonds of interest or affection that exist between men and men.

But in Aeria this was not possible. The firm belief, ingrained into the very being of all who had reached the age of thought, that where men left off here, whether in good or evil, they would begin their lives again hereafter, precluded

even the thought of such a lapse into social anarchy and individual sin.

For, happily for them, the union of true religion with true philosophy had now been accomplished in a national faith, and the result was that even the terrors of the universal end which was so near failed to shake the fortitude that was founded on a basis firmer than that of the world itself.

Though every home in the valley had its tragedy that night, a tragedy too sacred in its unspeakable solemnity for any mere words to describe it, when the next morning came the first bitterness of death had already passed.

Saving only the little children, who, too young to understand, laughed and played and sang in the sunlight as usual, in happy unconsciousness of their coming fate, the dwellers in Aeria rose with the next sunrise from their sleepless couches and went about their daily associations much as they had done the day before.

They did so rather as a matter of routine and discipline than of necessity, for now nothing more was necessary on earth. They had ample supplies of food to last them beyond the time when they would have no more need of it. It was of no use to dress the gardens and vineyards, or to till the fields that would be blasted into wildernesses before the harvest could be reaped.

There was no need to pursue further the triumphs of creative art and science which had transfigured Aeria into a paradise and a fairyland, for in a few weeks all these would be crumbled to dust with their own sepulchres—and yet they took up the work that lay nearest to their hands and went on with it as though they believed that there were still ages of life before humanity, and that the empire of Aeria was to endure for ever.

They knew that in work only lay the refuge from the torment of apprehension which might in the end drive even their highly disciplined minds into the delirium of despair and transform their orderly paradise into a pandemonium of anarchy and terror.

As soon as the first shock of inevitable horror had passed, as it did during that first terrible night when the death-sentence went from lip to lip throughout the land, their proud spirits rose superior to their physical fears and conquered them, and they resolved that, until the fatal hour came, nothing short of the dissolution of the world should put an end to social order in Aeria.

They were the royal race of earth, and when death came they would meet it crowned and sceptred in the gates of their palaces, and die as men who had solved the secret of life and death and so had no fear.

With the war that was raging beyond their borders they had now no personal concern. The quarrels of men and nations were as the bickerings of children in the presence of the fate that would so soon involve the world in ruin. And yet the rulers of Aeria were not willing that this fate should overtake their fellow-men in the delirium of blood-drunkenness.

They recognised that their duty to the nations bade them send the warning of the world's approaching fate far and wide through the earth and call for the cessation of strife, so that humanity might set its house in order and prepare to meet its end.

Whether the warning would be received or not was another matter. It was possible that both the Tsarina and the Sultan would laugh it to scorn, and pursue their path of now certain conquest through carnage and devastation to the end. That, however, was their concern.

As soon as the Council decided to despatch an envoy to summon the warring nations to cease their strife for the now more than ever worthless prizes of earthly empire, and to prepare for the cataclysm which would so soon dissolve all empires and kingdoms to nothing in the fiery crucible of the coming chaos, Alan at once renewed his petition and asked to be allowed to man the *Avenger* with a crew of volunteers and convey the warning to the Sultan and the Tsarina.

Since his second return to Aeria no word of love had passed between him and Alma. He was still too proud to become a

suitor even to her, knowing as he did that she had looked upon him as polluted by his involuntary relations with Olga. As before, they had met as friends whose friendship was warmed by the memory of an early but bygone love.

They had talked calmly and dispassionately of the coming end of earthly things, but neither of them had let fall any hint of a desire to meet it hand and hand with the other. His lips were sealed by the pride and anger of humiliation and hers by a spiritual exaltation which in the presence of approaching death raised her above the consideration of earthly love to the contemplation of even more solemn and holier things.

Then there happened an entirely unexpected event, which completely changed their relationship in an instant. On the third day after the delivery of the message in the temple a company composed of twenty old men, the heads of the noblest families in Aeria, presented to the President in Council, a petition, signed by every father and mother in the nation, praying that all in whose veins flowed the blood of Natas, Richard Arnold, and Alan Tremayne should, irrespective of all other considerations, be included among those who were destined to seek in the caverns of Mount Austral the one chance of escape from the universal doom.

So obvious and so weighty were the reasons advanced in support of the petition that when, like all other matters of State, it was put to the vote of the Council, the only dissentient voices were those of the President and the Vice-President.

The immediate effect of this decision—from which, by the laws of Aeria, there was no appeal—was that Alma, Isma, and Alan were exempted from the ordeal of selection and numbered beforehand among the Children of Deliverance.

The President took upon himself the duty of communicating this decision to those whom it so deeply concerned. He told Alan first, and this was the half-expected reply that he received—

"No, father, I have never disobeyed you or the Council, as you know, but I tell you now frankly that I will not take

advantage of what is after all only the accident of birth to save my life in such a crisis as this.

"Not only are there thousands of others in Aeria as good as I am, but I have already told you that, save under one condition, which you know as well as I do can never be realised, I have not the slightest desire to survive the ruin of the world. You may call this disobedience, rebellion, if you will, but it is my last resolve, and in such a time as this one does not make resolves lightly."

Alan said this standing facing his father in his private study. The President looked at him for a moment or two with eyes which, though grave, were neither reproving nor reproachful. Then he said with the shadow of a smile upon his lips—

"It is both disobedience and rebellion, my son, but though the Chief Magistrate must condemn it, your father cannot. I know, too, that not even the Council of Aeria can now enforce its commands. After all, the last penalty is but death, and that is a mockery now.

"I fully understand, too, the spirit in which you refuse the reprieve from the general doom, and prefer instead a mission which can scarcely end save in honourable death. It is the most noble one that you can choose, and you of all other men are the man to perform it.

"You have shown our enemies that you can strike hard in battle, so if they believe anyone they will believe you when you go to them with a message of peace enforced by such a solemn warning as you will take."

"Thank you, father," replied Alan simply, "not for what you say of me, but for the consent that your words imply. But what about the air-ship and her crew? I can do nothing without them, yet I cannot have them without the consent of the Council. Can you get that for me?"

"I believe so," said the President. "And if I can I will, since you are resolved to go, and since the honour of our name compels me to consent. But I must tell you that I feel sure that it will only be given conditionally."

"And what will the condition be?"

"That if you survive your mission you will return to Aeria before the end comes. They will have a right to demand that, for it is no part of your duty to deprive your companions of the chance of life, slender though it may be, that will remain for those who may be among the chosen."

"That is true," replied Alan, bending his head in acquiescence. "If we escape with our lives they shall return, though I shall not"—

"You will not return, Alan? Why, where are you going? Surely you are not going to leave Aeria again, and at such a time as this; you, who are already one of the chosen, a first-born son of the Master's line!"

It was Alan's mother who spoke. She had entered the room just as he had uttered the last sentence, and the ominous words struck a sudden chill to her heart. She came towards him with her eyes full of tears of apprehension and her hands stretched out pleadingly towards him.

Now that the first terror of the crisis was past, and there was one definite, however slender, hope of safety, she clung to it passionately for Alan's sake with a faith that made light of all the fearful difficulties which lay in the way of its realisation. In the sublime egotism of her mother-love the fate of a world shrank into insignificance in comparison with the one chance of safety for her only son.

"Yes, mother," replied Alan, taking her hands in his and bending down until his lips touched her upturned brow. "I am going to leave Aeria again to proclaim the Truce of God against the hour of His judgment, and I have just told my father that I shall not return"—

"No, no, my boy, you must not say that. You must not rob us of the one ray of light in this awful darkness that is falling upon us—of our one hope in all the world's despair!" cried his mother, letting go his hands and laying her own upon his shoulders as she looked up into his face with eyes that were now overflowing with tears.

"You will not leave us now, surely, for if we lost you we

could not even take the chance of life ourselves, for it would not be worth having."

"Nor would it be worth having, my mother, either to you or to me," he replied, gently laying his hand on hers, "if I lived and left untried the attempt that it is my plain duty to make. You would see me a lonely and unmated man among the parents of the new race, a man with a shadow upon his name, and the memory of an unfulfilled duty behind him.

"Remember that it is I who have brought the guilt of blood back again upon earth. Would you have me outlive all the millions of my fellow-creatures with the knowledge that I had not made one effort to bring back that peace on earth which was lost through me before the last summons comes to all humanity?"

"Alan is right, wife," interrupted the President, before she could make any reply to her son's appeal. "It is his duty to save, if he can, his fellow-creatures from being overwhelmed in the midst of their madness and their sin. Remember that, according to our faith, as all these millions, who are now drunk with battle and slaughter, and mad with the rage of conquest and revenge, end this life, so they must begin the next.

"There is time for him to speak and for them to hear, but whether they hear him or not, if he has spoken he has done his duty. Is it not better that if needs be he should die doing it than live and leave it undone?"

The weighty words, spoken as they were in a tone of blended affection and authority, found a fitting echo in his wife's breast. She stood for a moment between her husband and her son, looking from the one to the other. Then she dried her tears, and replied in a tone of gentle dignity and resignation—

"Yes, I see. You are right and I was wrong. It is his duty to go, and he must go. But," she continued, turning to Alan with the sudden light of a new hope in her eyes, "if I bid you 'God-speed,' my son, you will promise one thing, won't you?"

"Yes, mother, I will—whatever it is."

"Then promise me that if it shall be proved possible for you to live in happiness as well as in honour, you will come back."

"Yes," he replied, smiling gravely as he once more took her outstretched hands. "I will promise that as gladly as I would promise to enter Heaven if I saw the gates open before me."

"Then you shall go, and God go with you and bring you back in safety to us!" she said. Then, turning abruptly, she went out of the room, leaving them both wondering at her words.

This took place early on the morning of the 21st of May. An hour later the President had applied in Alan's name for the permission of the Council for him to select a crew of twenty volunteers and to take the *Avenger* to Europe on his mission to the warring peoples and to proclaim peace on earth and breathing space for humanity to prepare for its end. But then a new difficulty presented itself. Alexis, in spite of all Alan's remonstrances to the contrary, declared that he should never leave Aeria without him.

"I have shared in your exile and your return," he said, in answer to all arguments, "and, by the honour of the Golden Wings, I swear that I will either go with you now or you shall see me fall dead the moment that you leave the earth!"

This was the only oath that ever was heard upon the lips of an Aerian, and it was irrevocable, so, as there was no choice, Alan was forced to consent, and Alexis made ready to bid a last farewell to Aeria and all its dear associations.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALMA SPEAKS.

HAT night Alan, with his heart too full even for the society of his own home, went out of the city a little before midnight and walked down towards the western shore of the lake, where there still stood the same grove of palms in which, more than a hundred and thirty years before, Natasha and Richard Arnold had plighted their despairing troth and under the shadow of what threatened to be an eternal separation spoken the first words of love that had ever passed their lips.

It was not altogether accident that guided his steps in this direction, for all day he had been reviewing the strange chain of events which united the fate of his ancestors with his own, and it was natural that the most romantic episode in their lives should inspire him with a desire to see the scene of it once more.

So it came about that he stood, on what he believed to be his last night in Aeria, beneath the self-same ancient palms which five generations before had heard Natasha confess her love for the man who had sworn to give her in exchange for it that empire of peace which he, their descendant, had been the means of losing.

The story was, of course, familiar to him in its minutest details, and as he stood there, his own heart heavy with a hopeless sorrow, he pictured his great ancestor standing on the

same spot, holding the means of universal conquest in his hands, and yet accounting all things as worthless because the empire within his grasp must lack the supreme crown of a woman's love.

Then, looking back through the mists of the years that had gone by since then, he seemed to see the very shape of the Angel moving over the soft green sward where now the broad marble-paved roadway gleamed white beneath the trees, and to hear the musical murmur of her voice even as Richard Arnold had heard it on that eventful night.

"Alan!"

Was he dreaming, or was it the voice of his ancestress speaking to his soul in that hour of his lonely sorrow? A pale, shimmering, ghostly shape flitted across the quivering plumes of the palm-trees, dropped softly to the ground, and Alma stood before him in the well of her aerial boat.

Before his amazement had permitted him to utter a word she had stepped out and was coming towards him with outstretched hands, saying—

"They told me I should find you here. Alan, I have come to ask you to forgive me if you—before you go upon this mission of yours, if go you must."

"To forgive you, Alma!" he exclaimed, recoiling a pace in sheer astonishment at her presence and her words. "What can I have to forgive *you*? Is it not rather"—

"No, Alan, it is not," she said quickly, still holding out her hands to him and looking up at him with faintly flushed cheeks and shining eyes. "I see it all clearly now. Isma was right. It is I who have sinned against you, and it is for me to ask forgiveness."

"How can you ask that of me, Alma? How have you harmed me?" he asked, still bewildered by her beauty and the enigmas that she spoke in, yet taking her hands, and, as if by instinct, drawing her towards him.

"I will answer that afterwards," she said quickly, as though inspired by some sudden thought. "But tell me, first, are you quite resolved to go upon this mission?"

"Yes," he said with an almost imperceptible quiver in his voice. "Have I not had a great, if not a guilty, share in bringing this curse upon the world, and is it not fitting that I should give my last days to the task, however hopeless, of bringing back peace on earth so that men may die sane and not mad?"

"But, Alan, is that a higher duty than you owe to your family and your people? You know that in you centre all their hopes for the future, if there is to be one. With you would die the name of Arnold, and the direct line of Natas and Natasha."

"And with me they would die even if I went with the Children of Deliverance into the caverns of Mount Austral and survived the ruin of the world. How can you mock me like that, Alma? Have I not suffered enough for my weakness and my folly that you would condemn me to wander an exile in the wilderness that the world will be when it has passed through its baptism of fire?

"What is the swift death of battle or the short agony of the conflagration of the world compared with the long death-in-life that I should drag out alone in the new world that may arise from the ruins of this one?"

"And why alone, Alan?"

"Why alone? Can you ask me that, Alma? Surely you are mocking me now. Can you ask why I should be alone if I survived with the remnant of our people? Do you not even yet know why I choose the certainty of death rather than the chance of life?"

"But, Alan, what if I were to tell you that you would not go alone to the caverns, and that if the chosen few survive you will not wander alone on the wilderness of the new world?"

"I should tell you, Alma, that you meant to sacrifice yourself to save me, and that I would not accept the sacrifice even at your hands."

"Sacrifice! No, Alan, I would not outlive the world, even with you, on those terms. A woman of Aeria does not sell

"ONLY YOU CAN BID ME LIVE, ALMA." *Page* 317.

herself even for sentiment. This is no time for secrets or false shame, and I tell you frankly that if you had accepted the order of the Council, you should have lived and I would have died.

"But your rebellion proved to me that Isma was right when she rebuked my false pride by saying that the man who has fallen and risen again is better and stronger than he who has never suffered"—

"But, Alma, remember"—

"No, you must not interrupt me now, or what ought to be said may never be spoken. I know what you were going to say. You were going to tell me to remember that Olga Romanoff is still alive. Let her live—and let God judge her for her sins in the judgment that is so soon to come! What have we to do with her?"

"Nothing, Alma, after you have said that, for it tells me that in your eyes the stain is purged and the fault forgiven. I will take the message to her as to the rest of the world. If she receives it in peace then there shall be peace, and God shall judge between us"—

"And if not?"

"Then I will pit my single ship against hers and her fleet and only one of us, if either, shall see the end."

"And if that is you—what then?"

"Then it will be for you—under Heaven—to speak the words of life or death, for only you can bid me live, Alma."

As he spoke the great lights on the mountain tops suddenly blazed out, shone for a few moments, and were extinguished again. It was the answering signal to one from Mars; but it joined two souls as well as two worlds, for by its light Alan saw on Alma's face and in her eyes the one reprieve from death that honour would permit him to accept.

Without waiting for the words that her now smiling lips were opening to utter, he took her unresisting in his arms. Then her proudly carried, wing-crowned head drooped at last in sweet submission, and rested on his heart; and as he

turned her face up to his to take his kiss of re-betrothal, he said—

"That tells me that I may live. Now we are immortal, you and I, for this kiss is our eternity!"

Then their lips met, and for the instant Time had no more beginning or end. The impending ruin of the world was forgotten; for Love had spoken, and the very voice of Doom itself was silent amidst the happiness of their heedless souls.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SIGN IN THE SKY.

WHEN the news of what had happened at midnight in the palm grove was published the next morning far and wide through the valley of Aeria it would have been impossible to imagine that an irrevocable sentence of death was overhanging the land and all its inhabitants, save those who were to be selected to take the one chance that remained of surviving the chaos that was to come.

There was no one in the valley to whom Alan's story was not familiar in all its details, there was not a single heart that had not in the midst of its own happiness sympathised with him and Alma in their sorrow, and so, when that sorrow was at last turned into joy, everyone forgot for the moment the fate whose approach was so near and so certain, and rejoiced with them in the happiness that was great enough to raise them above the gloom that was already stealing over the world.

But in the midst of the general rejoicing came the decision of the Council upon the request which Alan had submitted to his father, and this, though he was forced to confess it wise and just, was by no means what, in his enthusiasm, he could have wished. The rulers of Aeria absolutely refused to permit any of the air-ships to leave the valley for at least two months to come.

They recognised with perfect approval the nobility of the resolve which Alan had taken to carry the message of the

world's approaching end to those nations which he had been, partially at least, responsible for plunging into the horrors of war, but they insisted that the concerns of Aeria must, in their eyes, take precedence of those of the outside world.

There was much to do, and the time for doing it was short. What was perhaps the greatest engineering task in the history of the world had to be conceived and completed within the next four months, and as Alan and Alexis were admittedly the two most skilful practical engineers in the State, the Council declined to allow them to run the almost certain risk of death at the hands of their enemies when their knowledge and skill ought to be devoted to the work of ensuring, as far as possible, the preservation of that remnant of the human race who should be destined to seek safety in the caverns of Mount Austral.

When the completion of that work was made certain, then permission would be freely given to them and their companions to go forth and proclaim their warning to the world, subject only to the condition that they were to take every precaution consistent with the honour of their race to return while there was yet time for them to take their places among the Children of Deliverance should the selection fall upon them.

Meanwhile, telephonic messages were to be sent to all those portions of the world with which Aeria was still in communication, conveying the exact terms of the warning that had been received from Mars, and calling upon the astronomers in all the observatories on the globe to verify the calculations for themselves, and publish their conclusions to their respective nations as quickly as possible.

With these terms Alan was of necessity obliged to be content. Indeed, when he came to review them in sober thought, he saw that, while nothing was to be lost, much was to be gained by submission to them.

Though he still refused, even in spite of the knowledge that he would share with Alma the future if there was to be one, to obey the order of the Council which exempted him from the ordeal of selection, he thought and worked with just as

much ardour as though the safety of the whole of the dwellers in Aeria, as well as his own, hung upon his efforts.

The caverns of Mount Austral, like those of other limestone formations in various parts of the world, had been formed in some remote geological period by the solvent action of water charged with carbonic gas upon the limestone rocks.

The entrance to them, discovered very soon after the valley had been colonised by the Terrorists in the first decade of the twentieth century, was situated on the inner slopes of the mountain about eight hundred feet above the level of the lake, which occupied the central portion of the valley.

This lake, although fed by hundreds of streams from the surrounding mountains, always preserved the same level, in spite of the fact that it had no visible outlet. Those who first explored the caverns found the explanation of this phenomenon.

Below the floors of the vast chambers which penetrated the heart of the mountain for a distance of nearly three miles there ran a deep chasm, through which rushed in a black, swift, silent stream the surplus waters of the lake. This stream was nearly a thousand feet below the entrance to the caverns and half that distance below the floor of the lowest chambers and galleries.

The scheme conceived by Alan and Alexis and their fellow-workers was in fact nothing less than the damming of this subterranean stream by a mighty sluice-gate composed of one huge sheet of metal which, running down into grooves cut in the solid rock and metal-sheathed, should completely close the inner mouth of the tunnel by which the waters entered the caverns.

This, once successfully fixed in its place, would deprive the lake of its only known outlet. The streams would go on flowing from the mountains and the waters of the lake would rise. The upper entrance would, when the fatal moment came, also be closed, not by one such door, but by three that would slide down one behind the other in the upper tunnel, which,

with a diameter of about thirty feet and a height of almost fifty, ran for nearly a quarter of a mile from the side of the mountain to the first of the chambers.

The spaces between these doors would be filled with ice artificially frozen, and shafts to allow for expansion should the ice melt and the water boil would run from them vertically, piercing the mountain-side. When the waters rose to the level of the entrance the doors would be lowered and the space filled with water and frozen. Then the waters would go on rising, the entrance would be submerged, and the defences of the fortress in which the remnant of humanity was to make its last stand for life would be complete.

But in addition to these outer defences there was an enormous amount of work to be done in fitting the interior of the caverns to receive those for whom they were to form an asylum.

They were already lighted by myriads of electric lamps, but the source of light was outside, and this had to be replaced by power-stations inside. Provision had to be made for keeping the air pure and vital, for supplying food and drink for an almost indefinite time, and for storing up a sufficiency of seeds and roots and treasures of art and creative skill, so that the new world might be clothed again with verdure and nothing essential of the splendid civilisation of Aeria be lost.

Such, in the briefest outline, was the momentous task to which the Aerians devoted all their splendid genius and unconquerable energies, and day by day and week by week they toiled at it, while the fatal hour which was to witness the last agony of man upon earth swiftly drew nearer and nearer.

The messages to the outside world had been sent and replied to. Those to the astronomers and to the governments of the Federation had been acknowledged in formal terms, which thinly concealed the incredulity with which they had been received.

Olga had treated the message with the silent disdain of a conquering autocrat—such, as in sober truth, she now was. The Sultan had replied to it in a despatch in which the dignity of a victorious despot and the fatalism of the religious fanatic

were characteristically blended. Then one by one the telephonic communications with the various parts of the world ceased; messages were sent out and repeated, but no answer came back.

First Europe, then Britain, then South Africa, America, and Australia, ceased to respond to the signals; and by the beginning of July Aeria was completely isolated from the rest of the world—probably the only stronghold that now remained unsubdued by the conquering fleets of the Sultan and the Tsarina.

Still the sentinel ships, hanging high in air over the valley, and constantly patrolling the outer slopes of the mountains, saw no sign of hostile approach. The last messages that had been received from the great cities of the Federation had told brief but fearful stories of the desolation that was following in the path of Moslem and Russian conquest.

The bridges of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus had been forced, and thousands after thousands of Moslem troops had been poured into Europe. Frenzied by fanaticism and the new-born lust of battle and conquest, the hordes of Asiatic tribesmen who had escaped the one terrific onslaught of the fleet under the command of Alexis had, now that the guardian ships were withdrawn, been hurried through Russia, and hurled upon the wealthy and almost defenceless cities of Western Europe.

The Federation was on the point of utter collapse, divided in its counsels, confused in its plans of defence, its armies undisciplined, and its fleets disorganised and daily diminishing in number and effectiveness.

In America, Australia, and Southern Africa there was anarchy on earth and terror in the air. Cities had been terrorised into capitulation by aerial squadrons, and then looted and burnt, and their ruins given up to be the miserable prey of the revolutionaries who now, as ever, had taken advantage of the universal panic to revolt against all government, and deny all rights but that which they claimed to prey upon the helpless, all liberty that was not license, and all property that was not plunder.

The last tidings of all that came from Europe were received from Britain, and, after recounting the destruction of London and the collapse of the Government, concluded with the news that Olga had publicly embraced the faith of Islam, and, in conjunction with the Sultan, whom she was to marry as soon as the conquest of Europe was finally complete, was forcibly converting her Russian subjects to the creed of the Koran.

So the affairs of the world stood when the sun went down on the 15th of July. On the meridian of Aeria it set at nine minutes to eight; at thirteen minutes past eight, according to the calculations made by the Martian and verified by the Aerian astronomers, the herald of Fate would approach within the range of terrestrial vision.

Before the brief period of tropical twilight had passed every telescope in the valley was turned to that spot in the constellation of Andromeda at which it was predicted to become visible. As the revolving earth swept Aeria into the shadow of night every light was extinguished, for it was known that the astronomers of Mars would be anxiously watching for a signal that would announce the correctness or the error of their calculations.

Vassilis Cosmo, seated at the eye-piece of the great equatorial telescope on Mount Austral, with his hand on the switch which controlled the electric currents that were waiting to do his bidding, watched the fields of space darken, and the stars of Andromeda shine out. Just a little below the line which joins the Square of Pegasus with the constellation of Cassiopeia, he saw, as usual, the oval, luminous cloud of the great nebula in Andromeda.

Four degrees towards the zenith, above the centre of the star-cloud, a tiny fan-shaped spray, faint and pale as a dissolving puff of white smoke, was floating in the black abyss of space. Precisely at the thirteenth minute of the hour he turned the switch, and the great suns on the mountain-tops blazed out and flashed the signal to the sister-world to tell its inhabitants that their prediction had been fulfilled to the second.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRUCE OF GOD.

BY the 30th of July the work in the caverns was so far advanced that the Council was able to authorise the departure of Alan and his companions for the outside world. The great vertical sluice-door, a huge sheet of steel forty feet long, twenty wide, and eighteen inches thick, and footed with a great indiarubber pad, was in its place, suspended at the top of the steel-lined grooves, which had been sunk three feet into each of the rock walls of the chasm into which the water-tunnel from the lake opened.

On the morning of the 30th it was sent down into its final position. The momentous experiment proved completely successful. The huge mass of metal descended slowly over the mouth of the tunnel into the black, swift stream at the bottom of the chasm. As its enormous weight crushed the indiarubber pad down into all the inequalities of the floor the outrush of the waters instantly stopped, and the channel ran dry save for the fierce jets of water which spouted out over the top of the plate.

The crevices through which these came were easily plugged, and when this was done it was found that the waters of the lake were rising at the rate of three feet an hour. This proved that, whether the lake had another outlet or not, the damming of the subterranean channels would be quite sufficient to flood the whole valley.

The gate was then raised again, and the waters permitted to flow as before. The triple doors at the entrance to the cavern were already in position when this was done, as the task of placing them had necessarily been much easier than the construction of the water-gate. Nothing but details now remained to be completed, and there was therefore no reason for any further postponement of Alan's mission.

Alexis had also succeeded in carrying his point, and getting permission to accompany Alan in the *Isma*. He had had no difficulty in satisfying the Council that the risk would be enormously diminished by sending two air-ships instead of one, for while Alan descended to the earth to convey his message to a hostile city, he would be able to remain in the air, dominating it with his guns, and ready to lay it in ruins if the flag of truce were not respected.

But the two friends had gained even more than this, for in answer to their earnest pleadings, in which it may be suspected they were not altogether unsupported by those as vitally concerned as themselves, a joint family council had decided that, under the unparalleled circumstances of the case, there was no valid reason for refusing consent to their immediate union with the two faithful brides who had waited so long and so patiently for their lords.

Therefore, on the morning of the 31st, it came to pass that they stood upon the spot sanctified by the ashes of their great ancestors, and took each other for man and wife, for life or death, as the hazard of the world's fate might decide, in the presence of a vast congregation of those who stood with feet already touching the brink of the valley of the shadow of death.

No bridal so strange or solemn had ever been celebrated in the world before. It was human love and hope and genius, serene and confident in the presence of the most awful catastrophe that had ever befallen humanity, defying the fate that was about to overwhelm a world in destruction.

That evening, as the sun was touching the tops of the western mountains, the last preparations for the voyage were

completed, the last farewells exchanged, and the *Isma* and the *Avenger*, now renamed the *Alma* by the hands of her name-mother, rose into the air amid salvoes of aerial artillery, and winged their way northward over the Ridge.

As they sped out over the plains of Northern Africa the sun sank, and out of the north-western heavens shone the luminous haze of the Fire-Cloud, which had now grown in visible magnitude until the two fan-like wings which spread out from its central nucleus spanned an arc of twenty degrees in the heavens.

As the two air-ships sped on their northward course towards Alexandria, where Alan had decided to make his first attempt to stay the progress of the world-war, the two pairs of new-wedded lovers watched with anxious eyes from the decks of their flying craft the terrible portent in the skies whose meaning they above all others on earth were so well qualified to read.

There could be no doubt now, even apart from all the elaborate calculations which had been made, that the prediction of the Martian astronomers was far more likely to be fulfilled than contradicted by the event.

Yet, so great was the happiness they found in this strange fulfilment of the faint hopes of years of almost hopeless waiting that, even as they journeyed on through the night with this threatening sign of approaching ruin pouring its angry light out of the skies, their talk was still rather of love and life and hope than of the death and desolation which they knew to be overhanging their race with such remorseless certainty.

They had lived and loved, and their love had found fruition. What more could they have asked of Fate than this, even if they could have prolonged their lives indefinitely by a mere effort of will? As Alan had said to Alma at the moment of their re-betrothal in the palm-grove, they were immortal now, and for them the death of a world was but an accident on the onward progress of an evolution in which such souls as theirs, veritable sparks of the divine fire itself, were the dominating factors.

As the Fire-Cloud paled in the West, and the eastern heavens brightened with the fore-glow of the coming dawn, the captains of the two vessels were roused by the signals from the conning-towers which told them that Alexandria was in sight.

As soon as he got on deck Alan signalled to the *Isma* to come close alongside. As she did so and the morning greetings were exchanged, Alma appeared on deck, and suggested that Alexis and Isma should come and have breakfast on board the flagship, so that the two captains could discuss their final plans before descending to the city.

The invitation was of course accepted, and an hour later the *Alma* commenced her descent towards the Sultan's palace, above which, from a lofty flagstaff, the banner of Islam was floating lazily in the early morning breeze. She flew no other ensign save a broad white flag of truce that streamed out from the signal-mast at her stern.

The whole city seemed asleep, secure in the conquests that had already been won. A single air-ship floated two thousand feet above the palace, and as he approached her Alan, keeping her well under his guns, flew from his mainmast the signal—"We come in peace. Will you respect the flag?"

The Moslem captain saw at a glance that a single shell would annihilate his vessel, and that the *Alma* was perfectly protected by her consort, circling two thousand feet above him, so he signalled, "Yes, come alongside." The *Alma* descended and swung round until she came on a level with the Moslem vessel, then she ran alongside within speaking distance, the doors of the deck-chambers were opened, and Alan, after exchanging salutes, asked her captain whether the Sultan was in his capital.

"Yes," replied the Moslem. "He is down yonder in his palace awaiting the coming of the Tsarina, for they are to join hands to-day and reign lord and mistress of the world they have conquered."

"Is the world, then, conquered?" asked Alan, with a smile on his lips and a note of scornful pity in his voice.

"Yes," said the Moslem. "East and west, north and south, the world is ours, saving only your own little land, and for that, I suppose, you have come to make terms of peace."

"I have not come to make terms of peace for Aeria, but for the world," replied Alan gravely. "But of that I must speak with your master. When will he be able to give me an audience?"

"That I cannot say," was the reply, "or even that he will hear you at all. But, pardon! I did not know that the angels of Paradise accompanied the Aerians on their voyages. Descend in peace, my master will receive you."

As he was speaking Alma, crowned with her crystal wings, and radiant with a beauty which, to the Moslem's eyes, seemed something superhuman, had come from the after part of the vessel to Alan's side. It was the first time that he had ever seen a woman of Aeria; and, with the innate chivalry of his race, he paid his involuntary homage to her as he would have done to an incarnation of one of the poetic dreams of his faith.

Then salutes were exchanged again between the two captains and the *Alma* sank swiftly downwards until she hovered twenty feet above the terrace on which Alan had first spoken with the Sultan on the night that he captured the *Vindaya*.

The approach of the Aerian warship had already summoned a party of guards to the roof, and after a brief parley a message was carried to the Sultan from Alan. A few minutes later Khalid stepped out of the doorway leading from the interior of the palace, magnificently attired as though for some great ceremonial.

He looked up and saw Alan standing with Alma by his side on the after-deck of his ship. He saw, too, that the flag of truce was flying from the stern and that the guns were laid alongside instead of being pointed down upon the city. He raised his hand in salute and said—

"I see you come in the guise of peace. If that is so you are welcome."

"It is peace if your Majesty will have it so," replied Alan,

returning his salute, and at the same time making a sign for the *Alma* to descend to the roof of the palace. As her keels touched the floor of the terrace, the steps fell from the after doorway, and he came down, leaving Alma standing on deck by the open door.

"Will not your companion honour my palace by touching its roof with her foot?" said Khalid, looking up at Alma as he exchanged greetings with Alan.

"My companion, Sultan, is the wife of the man whom you turned your back upon on this very spot as a liar, a traitor, and a murderer," said Alan, looking him straight in the eyes. "How, then, could she honour your palace by setting foot on its roof?"

For a moment the Sultan was abashed into silence by the directness of the rebuke, and then his Oriental subtlety and quickness of thought came to his aid, and, bending his head with royal dignity, he said—

"The angels do not mate with such men as that. The Tsarina must have been misled by appearances, perhaps, indeed, carried away by her hereditary hatred of your people. It is impossible that any but a true man could have won the love of such a woman. You tell me that you come as friends and not as enemies, so, for the hour, let there be peace, not war, between us. While you are my guests my city is yours, and all that it contains. I pledge my honour for your safety, so let the Daughter of the Air descend that I may hear from her lips the music of her voice."

Turning aside, half to hide a smile at the Oriental metaphor of the Sultan's speech, Alan went to the foot of the steps and held out his hand to Alma. As she alighted on the terrace he led her towards him, saying—

"This is my wife. Yesterday morning she was Alma Tremayne, a daughter in the fifth generation of the first President of the Federation. Her ancestor and yours made terms of peace after the War of the Terror. It is, therefore, more fitting that you should hear from her lips than from mine the message that we bring."

"My ears are waiting," said Khalid, bending low over the hand that Alma held out to him as Alan spoke. "It would be a strange message that would not be welcome from such lips."

From one whom she could have looked upon as an equal such language as this would have jarred sorely upon Alma, accustomed as she was to the frank directness of her own people's speech. But from Khalid she tolerated it as she would have tolerated the extravagance of a child, and as he raised his head again she looked at him with eyes that dazzled him afresh, intoxicated as he already was with her, to him, strange and almost unearthly beauty, and said in a voice such as he had never heard before—

"Thank you, Sultan, for your welcome, but surely there is little need for me to tell you what message we bring. Last night you saw it written in letters of fire across the heavens. Has not the voice of God spoken bidding you and your people to cease the cruel warfare that you are waging upon the world and to prepare for the end of which that is a sign?"

As she spoke she raised her hand and pointed to where the shape of the Fire-Cloud now hung in the sky like a white mist paling before the light of the rising sun.

"You rejected our first warning, as perhaps was natural, but now that you have seen the confirmation of it shining among the stars, surely you will no longer reject it."

The last words were spoken in a gentle, pleading tone, which no man could have heard without being moved by them.

"Daughter of the Air," replied the Sultan, following her hand with his eyes, "I have seen, and in a measure I believe, your message, though my interpretation of it may be other than yours. If the end of the world is at hand, the Commander of the Faithful will know how to meet it as a true believer should. It is not impossible that there may be peace between us yet in the last hours of earthly life, for I would not willingly make war on a people that has daughters such as you."

"Not for our sake, Sultan, but for the sake of all who have

survived this terrible warfare of yours we are come to plead with you for peace," said Alma. "This is no time for hate and strife and bloodshed. There will be horrors enough upon earth before long without any made by the fury of man. It is in your power to give peace to the world and breathing space to meet its end. Why will you not give it?"

"You forget it is not I alone who can give peace," replied Khalid. "If that were so"—

Before he could speak another word a salvo of aerial artillery shook the air above the city. All looked up towards the northern sky, whence the sound proceeded, and saw a squadron of twenty silvery-hulled air-ships flying the Moslem and Russian flags, and escorting in two divisions a warship, from whose flagstaff flew the imperial standard of Russia, and whose shining hull of azurine proclaimed her the lost *Ithuriel*.

Alan grasped the perilous situation in an instant, and was just about to tell Alma to go back on board their own ship when the Sultan, divining his intention, took a step forward and said—

"Do you think that Khalid cannot protect his guests or that his ally will not respect the hospitality of his house? You are safe. If a hair of your head were harmed the Tsarina and I would be enemies and she would come to her death instead of her bridal, for that is what brings her here. There is truce between us for this day at least, and she shall not break it."

As he ceased speaking the twenty air-ships opened out into a long line and remained suspended five hundred feet above the palace, while the *Revenge* continued her downward flight and alighted at the farther end of the terrace from where they were standing,

The after door of the deck-chamber opened as she touched the marble pavement, the steps dropped down, and Olga descended, attired as usual in a plain robe of royal purple, over which hung a travelling mantle of pearl-grey cloth as fine and soft as silk and lined with the then almost priceless fur of the silver fox.

Her head was uncovered save for a plain golden fillet, from which rose a pair of slender silver wings so thickly encrusted with diamonds that they seemed entirely fashioned of the flashing gems. The golden fillet shone out brightly yellow against the lustrous black of her thickly-coiled hair, and the diamond wings blazed and scintillated in the sunlight with every movement of her head.

As she descended the steps she was followed by Orloff Lossenski and a guard of honour of twelve of her officers, splendidly dressed and armed to the teeth, who, as soon as they landed, drew their swords, which were now only used as ornamental insignia of rank, and ranged themselves in two lines, one on either side of her.

Before the *Revenge* had alighted the Sultan had made a sign to one of the sentries, who blew a long, clear blast on a silver bugle, which was instantly answered by a hundred others from various parts of the city. At the sound the Moslem metropolis seemed to wake from sleep into universal activity.

Thousands of soldiers in brilliant uniforms poured into the empty streets, the Moslem and Russian flags ran up to a thousand flagstaffs, squadron after squadron of aerial cruisers soared up from the earth and saluted with salvoes of artillery, which shook the very firmament and brought Alexis down to within three thousand feet of the palace roof in the belief that Alan and Alma had fallen victims to some treachery, and that the time had come for him to avenge them by laying the city in ruins, as he had promised to do in such an event.

A single glance through his field-glasses showed him the true state of affairs, so he contented himself with keeping his crew at quarters with every gun trained on a Russian or a Moslem air-ship and ready to spread death and ruin far and wide should any harm happen to the *Alma* or her crew.

While this was taking place the Sultan's bodyguard had filed out on to the terrace resplendent with gorgeous uniforms

and glittering weapons, and between the two long lines that they formed Khalid advanced to meet his bride, leaving Alan and Alma interested and not unanxious spectators of the strange and unexpected scene.

They met half-way down the double line, and as Olga held out the hand over which Khalid bowed low as he raised it to his lips, she said, with a glance of undisguised hate towards Alan and Alma and a mocking smile on her lips—

"Your Majesty's generosity is unbounded! I see that you have invited to our wedding-feast the only enemies with whom we have yet to measure swords!"

"They have not come as enemies, Tsarina," replied Khalid, as he raised his head and looked with but half-restrained ardour on the beauty that was so soon to be his. "Nor yet have they come at my invitation. Alan Arnold and his wife"—

"His what!" interrupted Olga, her cheeks burning and her eyes flashing with a sudden blaze of uncontrollable anger.

"His wife, Tsarina," replied Khalid, somewhat coldly. "The son of Natasha and Richard Arnold has mated with the daughter of Alan Tremayne, and they have come in the fifth generation to warn you, the daughter of the House of Romanoff, and me, the son of the line of Mohammed Reshad, to cease our warfare upon the nations and prepare for the universal end which, they tell us, is at hand."

Khalid spoke, as Olga thought, half in jest and half in earnest, so she continued in the same mocking tone in which she had first spoken—

"Then if that is so, if all human enmities are soon to be purged by the all-destroying fires, we may as well meet in peace for the moment. Will your Majesty honour me by presenting me to your uninvited guests?"

"Uninvited, but still my guests, Tsarina," replied Khalid gravely, "and therefore I need not ask you"—

"No, Sultan," said Olga, interrupting him, "you need ask me nothing. You need not fear that I shall not

respect the hospitality of your house, even when extended to them."

As she spoke she gave him her hand again and he led her between the silent, rigid ranks of his guards to where Alan and Alma were standing.

Since men and women had learned to love and hate there had been no such strange meeting between two women as that which now took place between Alma and Olga. It was the first time that Olga had ever seen a woman of the race to which Alan belonged, and Alma, for the first time confronted with a daughter of the "earth-folk," saw in Olga Romanoff at once the most beautiful woman outside the confines of Aeria and the incarnation of everything that she had been trained to look upon as evil.

While the Sultan was speaking the words of presentation their eyes met, and Alma thought of that sentence in Alan's letter to his father, "She is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend," while Olga looked back to the time when she first heard Alma's name and hated her for the sake of him who now stood beside her, her lover and her husband—the man *she* had held in bondage for years without winning one voluntary caress from him.

Alma's first emotion was one of wonder. Hitherto, she had seen nothing beautiful that was not at the same time good, for in Aeria the conceptions of beauty and goodness were inseparable. But here was a woman of almost perfect physical loveliness, after her own type, who was beyond all doubt guilty of the most colossal crime that a human soul had conceived or a human hand had carried out since men first learned to sin.

The world, which ten years before had been a paradise of peace, prosperity, and enlightened progress, was now a wilderness of misery and an inferno of strife, fast lapsing back into barbarism—and all this was her doing.

As this thought came to Alma's mind, standing out distinct among all the others that were forcing themselves upon her, wonder gave place to unspeakable horror, and as Olga

approached, with the light of hate still burning in her eyes and the same mocking smile upon her lips, she instinctively shrank back as though to avoid contact with some unclean thing. As she did so her hand slipped through Alan's arm and a visible shudder ran through her form.

Marvellous as Olga's power of self-control and dissimulation was, she failed entirely to restrain the passion which such a reception aroused within her. It was the first time in her life that she had ever stood in the presence of a woman untainted by a spot of sin or shame, and this woman recoiled from her in visible loathing, beautiful and mighty as she was, at the very zenith of her conquering career and on the morning of her promised union with the man who, as she believed, would before many days share the empire of the world with her.

Hardened as she was, the mute rebuke cut her to the quick. The flush on her cheeks died out and left her so pale for the moment that her face looked almost ghastly with its grey lips and black burning eyes. This daughter of a higher race had at a single glance pierced the splendid mask which covered the fearful deformity of her true nature. She thought of the night long ago in the bedroom at St. Petersburg when by the light of the unearthly flame hovering above her poison-still she had seen her image in the mirror.

Then pride and anger came to her rescue. The blood returned to her cheeks and lips, she drew herself up to the full height of her queenly stature, and as the Sultan spoke the words of presentation she slightly inclined her head, and then raising it again said, in low, even tones, whose wonderful music sent a chill to Alma's heart—

"This is a pleasant surprise, Alan Arnold. I little thought that after our last parting we should meet again, save in battle, much less did I think that you would honour my bridal by bringing your own bride to it. Still, as the Sultan tells me, there is truce for to-day, and, so far as to my enemy, you are welcome."

"We have not come as guests to your bridal, Tsarina," said Alan coldly and gravely, "nor have we come to make truce as between mortal enemies. The enmities of men and nations are but as child's-play now. We have come to proclaim the Truce of God against the hour of His final judgment."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

H, I see," said Olga. "You have come to tell us this wonderful story about the comet, and the message you say you have received from Mars, over again. You are not the first who have prophesied the end of the world by such means, nor will you be the last to be discredited by the event.

"Once for all, then, let me save misunderstanding by telling you that I don't believe a word of it, and therefore nothing that you can say will have any effect on the course of action that I have determined upon. You are of course at liberty to preach your truce elsewhere and at your own risk, though I fear it will be but the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

"Yes, truly in the wilderness," said Alma before Alan could reply, "but a wilderness that you have made with your own hand, Tsarina. You who have been the evil genius of the world, have you not done harm enough, now that the world has only a few more weeks to live?"

"According to the idle tale you bring us," interrupted Olga, repressing with a barely successful effort the anger aroused afresh within her by the serene tone in which Alma spoke. It sounded rather like the voice of an angel speaking to a mortal than of one woman addressing another, and even to herself Olga was forced to admit that there could be no

question of equality between this daughter of the air and herself.

"It is no idle tale," replied Alma, almost in the same tone which she might have used in reproving a wayward child, "it is not even a prophecy, it is a mathematical certainty, and if you understood you would believe."

"You are wasting time and your own breath," said Olga scornfully. "You are not my guests but the Sultan's, yet he may allow me to say that we have other demands upon our attention more important than listening to such sentimentalism as this."

Before Alma could answer, Alan turned to the Sultan as though not deigning to reply to Olga's insulting speech.

"Your Majesty, I see that this is no time to perform the mission upon which I came. We did not expect the presence of the Tsarina here. Had we done so we should not have come, for I know how vain it would be to reason with her. I came prepared to satisfy the most skilful astronomers in your kingdom that what I say is absolutely true, and I ventured to hope that you, if satisfied by their assurances, would give peace to the world for the remnant of its days.

"But even so it is not for us to interrupt or even to introduce an unpleasant element into the doings of to-day, so, with your Majesty's permission, I will leave the calculations with your minister and relieve you and the Tsarina of our unwelcome presence."

All this time the Grand Vizier, Musa al Ghazi, had been standing a little to the rear of the group stroking his beard nervously and looking anxiously from one to the other. He seemed about to speak, when Khalid said to Alan with a courtesy which contrasted strongly with Olga's contemptuous demeanour—

"I thank you, Prince of the Air. As matters stand I think that will be the most reasonable as well as the most convenient course. Though I am far from convinced that you are not mistaken, yet I can assure you that the best

skill in my domains shall examine what you leave us. Musa!"

The old man turned pale as his master pronounced his name, and stepped forward with a visible agitation, which was by no means accounted for by the circumstances of the strange situation. Instead of waiting for Khalid's commands he said as he made his obeisance before him—

"Commander of the Faithful, I am here; but before your Majesty bids me take these papers from the hands of Alan Arnold I would ask permission to say a word that must be said in private."

"In private, Musa?" said Khalid, frowning slightly and passing his hand down his beard. "This is hardly a time for State secrets."

"It is but my duty to my master that bids me speak," replied the old man, again bending before him. "A moment will suffice for the speaking of what I have to say."

Musa's tone was so earnest and his anxiety so palpable, that Khalid without more ado made his excuses to the Tsarina and his unexpected guests and stepped aside out of earshot with his Vizier.

"Well, Musa, what is it that is so pressing and yet so private?" he asked, a trifle impatiently.

"My master," replied the old minister, in a voice that now trembled with emotion, "there is no need to examine the calculations from Aeria. An hour before daybreak Hakem ben Amru, your chief astronomer at the observatory of Memphis, came to me and told me that he had completed his own calculations of the curve and period of the comet, and that, allowing for difference in longitude between our meridian and that of Aeria, the prediction from Mars will be fulfilled beyond all doubt at midnight on the 23rd of September."

This was testimony which it was impossible for Khalid to question. Musa's sincerity was beyond all question and Hakem ben Amru was the most renowned astronomer in the world outside Aeria. Khalid recoiled a pace as though

he had been struck, and said in a voice hoarse with sudden emotion—

"Why did you not tell me this before, Musa?"

"Because I would not mar my master's happiness for this day at least," replied Musa. "If it be true that the end of earthly things is at hand a day is of but small account. To tell you would neither hasten nor delay the end. But Alan Arnold's words forced me to speak, for I knew that Hakem would speak if I did not."

"Khalid laid his hand upon the old man's shoulder and said gravely but kindly—

"It was well thought, Musa, and I thank you for your consideration, evil as your news is. It is Kismet, and the will of Allah must be done!"

So saying he turned away and walked with slow steps and downcast eyes to where Olga was standing talking to Orloff Lossenski with her back turned in open contempt upon Alma and Alan. A single glance at his face told her that Musa had had no pleasant tidings to impart.

"Your Majesty looks grave," she said. "Has Musa given you news of some disaster to our forces?"

"More than that, Tsarina," replied Khalid. "He has brought me confirmation that I cannot doubt of the truth of the message from Aeria."

"What!" exclaimed Olga in a quick passionate tone that all standing near could hear. "The confirmation of that thrice-told tale with which these people are trying to impose on our fears! Surely your Majesty is jesting now?"

"No, Tsarina, it is no subject for jesting but only for earnest and solemn thought," answered Khalid seriously.

"I neither can nor *will* believe it!" cried Olga passionately, her long-restrained anger completely overcoming her prudence and her whole soul rising in ungovernable revolt. "Believe or not as you will, I will not. It cannot be possible; it is too monstrous for all credence!

"Why, one would think the very Fates themselves were fighting against us if that were true, and were bringing

the world to an end just as we have conquered it for our own!

"As for these Aerians," she continued, turning upon Alan and Alma and taking a couple of steps towards them, "they have come here with this wild story to cover an attempt to make terms with us before it is too late. It is a trick to deceive you, but it shall not succeed in my presence. Do you not remember how, upon this very spot little more than a year ago, I showed you this same Alan Arnold, who now comes preaching about his Truce of God, as the shameless liar and traitor that he is."

She had thrown off all disguise and all restraint now. Hatred was shining out of her eyes and open scorn was upon her lips. She waved her hand with a contemptuous gesture towards them and went on—

"If you have come to ask for terms of peace, be honest and say so. You need not fear to speak, for there may be conditions on which we will let you live."

Khalid was about to utter some reproof, and Alan's hand had gone instinctively to the hilt of his rapier, when Alma stepped forward and faced Olga, her own eyes now burning dark with anger and her cheeks flushed with the hot blood which Olga's insult had called to them.

"Make terms with you!" she said, looking down upon her from the height of her splendid stature. "With you, who have laid the earth waste and made the habitations of men desolate —with you, whom I could strike dead at my feet without staining my hand by laying it upon you! It is for you to make terms, if you can, not with us but with the Heaven whose justice you have outraged and whose patience you have scorned!

"Cease this idle talk of battle and conquest, this impious defiance of the decrees of Fate! Can you make terms with God? If so, then when you see His sign blazing in the heavens to-night cause it to change its path and pass aside from the earth. If not kneel down and pray, not for your life, for that would be useless, but for strength to meet your end in the midst of the desolation that you have created!"

Olga heard her in silence to the end, her whole being shaken with the tempest of passion that Alma's words set raging in her breast. For a moment she stood speechless, white to the lips, and trembling in every limb from very rage. Then she suddenly stepped back a pace, and cried in a voice more like the cry of a wild animal in pain than human speech—

"Whether the world lives or not *you* shall not, whatever comes!" and as she spoke she snatched a pistol out of her girdle and levelled it at Alma's heart. Before she could spring the lock Alan had snatched Alma up in his arms and Khalid, with a cry of horror and anger, had sprung forward and grasped Olga's wrist.

The bullet flew high, cutting one of the wings off Alan's coronet in its flight. Half a dozen strides took him alongside his ship, and in another instant he was standing on her deck, his left arm round Alma's waist holding her behind him and his right hand grasping one of his pistols.

He raised his arm and the pistol flashed. At the same moment he stamped on the deck and the *Alma* leapt a thousand feet obliquely into the air. The second before the pistol flashed Olga turned her head as though she were going to fire again, and the motion saved her life, for Alan's bullet, instead of piercing her brain, as it was meant to do, cut a straight red gash across her forehead from temple to temple and buried itself in the breast of Orloff Lossenski as he sprang forward to snatch his mistress out of the line of fire.

He pitched forward and dropped, and Khalid, forgetting everything else in the horror of the moment, caught Olga in his arms as a rain of blood streamed down over her face and a shrill scream of pain and rage burst from her lips.

Although there were nearly three hundred warships floating in the air above Alexandria, and though the rapidly-enacted tragedy on the roof of the palace could be distinctly seen from their decks, the *Alma* escaped scathless, for the simple reason that, so terrible was the energy developed by the projectiles in use, that had one struck her as she left the terrace the palace itself would have been wrecked, and every living being within

a radius of two hundred yards from the focus of the explosion would have been instantly killed.

Consequently, the captains of the Russian and Moslem ships had to look on in angry impotence as she leapt out of range, joined her consort, and with her soared away westward until a height of fifteen thousand feet was reached, and so vanished from the sight of their discomfited enemies.

From Alexandria they crossed the Mediterranean and Europe to Britain by way of Italy, the Valley of the Rhone, and Paris, at a height of some five thousand feet from the land. What they saw more than justified the reports which had reached Aeria. The fairest countries of Europe were now only blackened deserts and wasted wildernesses.

They flew all day over deserted fields and towns and cities that were little better than heaps of blackened ruins, and when night fell and the Fire-Cloud blazed out of the sky, its glare was answered by flames rising from the earth, and huge patches of mingled smoke and flame which marked the sites of other towns which were only now falling victims to the destroyers.

Society had practically come to an end. People who a few weeks before had been wealthy watched almost with apathy the plunder of their homes and the burning of their palaces by the armed bands of robbers which sprang up everywhere. There was no longer any protection for life and property. If anarchists on the earth did not burn and slay and plunder, their enemies in the air would, and even if they did not, what did it matter if friends and foes, plunderers and plundered, were to be consumed together in the fire that was about to fall from heaven?

Amidst the universal terror Alma, with her almost unearthly beauty, the calm dignity of her bearing, and the sweetness and gentleness of her loving counsels, passed through the devastated lands rather like an angel of mercy than a woman of the same flesh and blood as the distracted panic-stricken crowds through which she moved by Alan's side, speaking her message in a voice that seemed to be an echo from some other world.

When the *Alma* and the *Isma* reached London ten days

after leaving Alexandria, they found the vast and once splendid metropolis of the world a wide waste of broken, blackened, and in some places still smoking ruins. Of its fifteen millions of inhabitants barely three millions remained to people its fragments. All the rest had either fled soon after the first assault, or had fallen in the pitiless carnage that had been let loose upon them.

They remained three days amidst the ruins of London, listening to the most heartrending tales of suffering and cruelty, and giving in return such consolation as they could. Then they took the air again, and journeyed on westward over the once fair and smiling English land that was now a wilderness amidst which plague and famine, anarchy and destruction, stalked triumphant, while the few who listened to their message waited in despairing terror for the fate that could hardly be worse than what they had passed through since the fatal 16th of May.

From England they crossed the Atlantic to America, and from America they sped over the Pacific to Australia, finding everywhere the same desolation upon the face of the earth, and the same terror and despair in the minds of men. But for the awful reality before their eyes, it would have been impossible for them to believe that the civilisation which had seemed so strong and splendid four months before, could have collapsed as it had done into such utter chaos.

In those four short months the whole tragedy of human life on earth seemed to have been re-enacted. The frenzy and panic of war had degenerated into a universal delirium. Men, women, and children had gone mad by millions. Religious fanatics, impostors, and enthusiasts, if possible more insane than their hearers, preached the wildest and most blasphemous doctrines, and uttered the most hideous prophecies, not only as to the approaching end of the world, but of the imaginary eternal horrors that were to follow it.

The art and science and culture of five hundred years had been forgotten in those few weeks of madness, and mankind had sunk back wholesale into the grossest superstitions of the Dark Ages. Every night, when the flaming shape of the Fire-

Cloud blazed out among the stars, millions fell down on their knees and greeted it with prayers and invocations, as savages had once been wont to worship their fetishes.

By the end of August, when the fiery arc overarched more than two-thirds of the heavens and rivalled the sunlight itself in brightness, the degeneration of humanity had advanced to such a fearful stage of intellectual and moral depravity, that even human sacrifices were offered to appease the wrath of the deity who was believed to have taken the shape of the Fire-Cloud. Under the influence of delirium the human mind had gone back through twenty-five centuries, and the worship of Baal and Moloch had returned upon earth.

Only a small minority of men and women preserved their senses amidst the universal madness. These greeted the Aerians as friends, and heard their message, and promised to remain steadfast to the end, but as day after day went by and the terror grew and the nations plunged deeper and deeper into the saturnalia of frenzy and despair, the task undertaken by Alan and Alma grew more and more hopeless, and when the last day of August came, they at length confessed to themselves that it was useless to pursue it any further.

This, too, was the day on which the term of absence granted by the Council expired, and so at nightfall, after having carried their message round the whole world and passed it, by the mouths of those who were willing to listen, through many lands, they at length reluctantly turned their prows homeward, and, with hearts sickened by all the unspeakable horrors they had witnessed, soared upward into the luridly-lighted heavens, leaving the world to the fate which in twenty-three days more would overwhelm the conquerors and the conquered, the few sane and the many mad, in universal and inevitable destruction.

Alan timed his arrival so that the *Alma* and her consort crossed the Ridge a few minutes after sunrise on the 1st of September. As they alighted in the central square of the city and disembarked to greet the group of friends and kindred who were waiting to receive them, a strange stillness struck their ears and sent a mysterious chill to their hearts.

The splendid capital of Aeria seemed like a city of the dead. Its broad white streets and squares were empty, there were no boats on the lake, and no aerial yachts in the air as there were wont to be at sunrise. The gardens were deserted and silent, even the songs of birds which had welled up from them in a chorus of greeting to the coming sun were now hushed, and the birds themselves were flying restlessly from branch to branch, twittering and calling to each other, frightened sharers in the universal fear. It was not long before Alan learnt from his father the explanation of this strange and mournful change in the life of the valley. A few days after their departure a mysterious epidemic had appeared among the people of Aeria. First the old, then the middle-aged, and then the young had been silently and swiftly stricken down, first in hundreds and then in thousands.

There was no sign of physical disease, no apparent source of physical infection, and none of the horrors which characterised the plagues that were decimating the outside world. Those attacked by it went to bed in apparently robust health, and in the morning they were found dead with an expression of perfect peace upon their features and no marks of disease upon their bodies.

That was all that was publicly known. There had been, and, as the President told his son, there would be no inquiry into the cause or origin of the epidemic. Whether those who died died voluntarily, or whether the visitation was a merciful release from the torment and terror of the general doom, it was not for those who survived to ask.

It was enough for them that the Shadow of Death had begun to steal silently and swiftly over the land of the royal race who had raised the dignity of humanity to a height untouched before in the story of man. They were content to know that their friends and kindred were permitted to die in painless peace rather than forced to writhe out their last hours in torture amidst the conflagration of the world.

All day and all night for nearly a month the fires of a hundred crematoria had burned, and day and night the

funeral processions had never ceased passing through their gates. The population of Aeria, which had been over a million at the end of July, was now little more than a hundred thousand, and these were hourly dwindling under the mysterious epidemic.

Those who had returned in the *Alma* and the *Isma* accepted all without question and applied themselves with all their energy to the performance of the solemn duties that remained to them.

The work in the caverns of Mount Austral was now almost completed, and the minute calculations which had been made had shown that it would be possible for two hundred and fifty souls to find a refuge in them for ten days if necessary.

Sufficient supplies of food had been already stored, the machinery for lighting the caverns was complete, and solid oxygen had been enclosed in steel reservoirs to supply what would be consumed by respiration, while provision had also been made for continually abstracting the carbonic acid and other injurious constituents from the respired air.

Everything that human genius and skill at their best could do to ensure the preservation of this remnant of humanity, had been done, and by the 15th of September the caverns were finally ready for occupation. Only one more task now remained to be completed, and this was the selection of those who were to survive, provided that the precautions taken proved adequate. Unspeakably pathetic as this work of selection was, it was performed with a calm and apparently passionless precision worthy of the unparalleled solemnity of the occasion and the splendid traditions of those who accomplished it.

The field of selection was first narrowed by confining it to those who had been regularly betrothed when the first message was received from Mars. From these first the physically perfect were chosen, then the strongest and the fairest of these, and finally those who to their physical perfections added the highest intellectual and moral qualities.

The work was performed by the Ruling Council assisted by a council of an equal number of matrons who had what had once been accounted the misfortune to be childless. Neither joy nor sorrow was shown, at least in public, either by those who were chosen or by those upon whom the joint Council was forced to pronounce sentence of death by rejecting them.

The natural joy of the chosen was lost in the universal sorrow of the now inevitable parting, and those who were destined not to survive, satisfied with the perfect justice with which the selection had been made, consoled each other with the knowledge that they would die hand in hand and be spared the sorrow of surviving all who were nearest and dearest to them.

On the morning of the 18th, the temple of Aeria witnessed the last ceremony that would ever take place within its walls. This was the marriage of those who, unless their last refuge shared in the destruction that was about to bring chaos upon earth, were to be the parents of the new race that was to repeople the world.

The survivors of the whole nation now barely filled the vast interior of the temple. The solemn words which bound youth and maid together as man and wife to face side by side the last ordeal that humanity would ever have to pass through were spoken in the midst of a silence which reigned not only in the temple but now throughout the whole valley.

All the sentinel ships had now been withdrawn save one, which, from a height of fifteen thousand feet, still kept watch and ward against the coming of the foe that was even yet expected. But this was the only sign of life within the confines of Aeria, and when the solemn ceremony was ended and the assembly filed out of the doors, the members of it betook themselves almost in silence to their homes, there to make their final preparations for life or death as Destiny had selected them to live or die.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LAST BATTLE.

AT sunset on the 15th the sluice-door had been finally lowered into its place and the pent-up waters of the lake of Aeria had risen nearly forty feet by the next morning. Only the upper parts of the villas on its banks were visible and its area was so enormously increased that the whole appearance of the valley was altered.

Rising at first at the rate of three feet an hour, a rate which of course decreased as the area became greater, the waters would reach the entrance to the caverns soon after sunset on the evening of the fatal 23rd.

A little before midnight on the 21st the *Orion*, the sentinel ship that was on guard at the time, sank swiftly down with the news that she had made out by the light of the Fire-Cloud which, lurid and ghastly as it was, was as brilliant and penetrating as that of the sun at noonday, a large fleet of air-ships approaching from the northwards. The city was by this time almost entirely submerged. Only a few minarets and towers and the top of the great golden dome of the temple surmounted by its crystal-winged figure, showed above the surface.

The remnant of the people of Aeria, now reduced to less than seven thousand souls, including those chosen to take refuge in the caverns, were occupying the villas on the slopes of Mount Austral about the entrance to the caverns. Six thousand of them were men who had lived solely in the

hope of such an attack as was now about to be made and which would enable them to die fighting the common enemy of mankind to the last in defence of their beloved native land.

Not even now, when the hand of Destiny had set a definite limit to all human hopes and fears, and when the remainder of their own lives could be counted by hours, could this faithful remnant of the Aerians endure the thought that what had been their paradise and their home should be violated and polluted by the appearance of their foes.

Therefore they had lived for this last battle, and five hundred air-ships were waiting to carry them into the air to engage in the last fight that ever would be fought on earth. All their friends and kindred, saving only the Children of Deliverance, as in fond fancy they had called the little band of the chosen ones, were now dead, and the few hours of life that were left to them had nothing more to give them.

So they received with a grim joy the summons to battle which had been so long expected. Four thousand of them manned the air-ships, the rest occupied the mountain batteries, and within a quarter of an hour of the bringing of the news the war-ships had mounted into the air, and the great guns of the batteries were ready to hurl their projectiles upon the advancing foe.

It was a spectacle to make angels weep and devils laugh, this last marshalling of the forces of human hate and hostility in the closing hours of the life of humanity and on the threshold of eternity. It seemed that the Tragedy of Man was to be played out to the bitter end, and that human strife was only to cease on earth with the destruction of the world. This, too, was the work of a single woman inspired by quenchless hatred and insatiable ambition and a pride of spirit which, in its haughty incredulity, still refused to believe that the end of her conquering career had come.

Pitiless and without scruple to the end, Olga, while she was recovering from her wound under the shelter of the Sultan's roof, had managed, with the aid of her waiting-woman Anna, not only to poison the Grand Vizier Musa and Hakem

the astronomer, but also to bring Khalid himself into the same state of moral slavery in which she had so long held Alan and Alexis.

It was she who had brought this fleet from Alexandria to Aeria. Once under the fatal spell of her will-poison, she had commanded Khalid to revoke the orders that he had given for peace, and he had obeyed. A fleet of more than five hundred air-ships had been collected, and, taking Khalid with her on board the *Revenge*, so that there should be no chance of his recovering his volition, she had come to fulfil the prophecy which Paul Romanoff uttered when in the last hour of his life he had declared that one day the Eagle of Russia should fly over the battlements of Aeria.

All the materials for constructing ten air-ships had been taken into the caverns, so that in the event of the remnant surviving the empire of the air should still be theirs, but the *Alma* and the *Isma* still lay outside the entrance when the other ships had risen into the air.

At the supreme moment a controversy had arisen as to whether or not Alan and Alexis—the latter of whom had been placed without question among the chosen, not only because of his unequalled engineering skill, but also because without him a daughter of the House of Arnold would have died of her own will—should or should not take part with their companions in the near approaching conflict.

This dispute was brought to a sudden close by Alan, who, with a sudden inspiration, cut short all the loving entreaties that were being made to him to take refuge in the caverns and avoid the chance which in the heat of the conflict might destroy with him the male line of the descendants of the first conqueror of the air.

"Do you not see," he said, "that it is quite possible that their fleet may be twice as strong as ours, and that in spite of all our gallant forlorn hope can do they may cross the mountains and send their shells into the valley?

"What if one of them exploded here and wrecked the outworks and the entrance to the caverns? All hope, even for

us, would then be lost, the doors could not be lowered, and we should either have to let the waters of the lake flow out or they would flow into the caverns by the upper entrance and ruin all our labours.

"We have proved that the *Alma* and the *Isma* are the two best air-ships in existence. They can soar higher and travel faster than any others. Would it not be madness to deprive our defending force of them, and would it not be cowardice in us not to do all we can to save all that is left for us to hope for on earth? I for one shall go, and I don't believe that I shall go alone."

"If the *Alma* goes the *Isma* goes too," said Alexis. "Alan is right. We should be cowards to turn our backs on the enemy at the last moment."

"And if you go, we go," said Alma and Isma in a breath. "If you live we will live with you, but we will not live without you."

There was no answer to such reasoning as this, nor was there any longer any law on earth save that of individual will. The first motive power that had swayed the world was the last that survived and would be the last to die. Those of the old crews of the two air-ships who were found among the chosen at once came forward to take their places, and with them came too those who had elected to take the hazard of life or death with them.

"There shall be no widows in the new world," said they. And so every man who rose into the air on board the two great warships carried with him the woman without whom the one last chance of life would not have been worth taking.

As they left the earth the remainder of the little company retired into the caverns, leaving two sentinels posted at the outer door ready to give the alarm in case it should be necessary to lower the doors. As they did so a long, dull, distant roar came from the northward telling that the last battle of man with man had begun.

In accordance with a plan hastily arranged before they rose, the *Alma* was to guard the northern end of the valley, while

the *Isma* kept watch over the southern. They soared up and up until the peaks of the mountains were a good five thousand feet below them.

From this elevation those on board the *Alma* could see the enemy's fleet stretching out in a huge crescent, made up of tiny points of light which shone in the unnatural glare that illumined the earth and sky, and ever and anon they saw enormous spheres of flame blaze out along the line as the projectiles from the land batteries burst in front of them. The gunners were only trying their range and the enemy were still beyond it.

The explosion of the projectiles told the assailants that Aeria was on the alert, still prepared for battle and still, for all they knew, as impregnable as ever. Seeing this, they ceased their advance and a battle of tactics preceded the pitiless struggle which only the victors would survive.

Hour after hour the Moslem and Russian air-ships strove to out-soar the Aerians, or to make a rush in twos and threes that would bring them within range of the charmed circle of the mountains. But no sooner did one of them sweep up at full speed out of the distance and slow down sufficiently to train her guns than the atmosphere about her was convulsed with a mighty shock and changed instantly into a mist of fire, and when this vanished she had vanished too, shattered to fragments which dropped in a rain of molten metal thousands of feet to the earth below.

Morning came, the flaming arch of the Fire-Cloud sank lower and lower in the heavens until it stretched a broad band of lurid light round the western horizon, and an unclouded sun brought the last dawn but one that the terror-maddened myriads of earth would ever see. Still the fight went on at long ranges; still ship after ship of the hostile fleet made its desperate effort to cross the invisible barrier which was drawn all round Aeria by the range of its protecting guns, only to be overturned and hurled to the earth by the shock of an exploding projectile or to be fairly struck and dissolved to dust.

No matter how high they attempted to soar, the *Alma* and the *Isma* were still above them, and if the shells from the land batteries failed to do their work the guns of the air-ships did it for them and the result was the same—annihilation.

The night of the 22nd was spent in incessant attack and defence. The crews of the Aerian ships, grown desperate in their supreme despair, now left the mountains and sallied forth into the open, engaging the enemy ship for ship and gun for gun in a last determined effort to destroy them, or be destroyed, and far out from the still untouched battlements of Aeria the fight raged fast and furious.

There now was no thought of safety in the hearts of the Aerians. They had come forth to kill and be killed. The rules of aerial tactics were utterly neglected. They laid their guns alongside and, rushing through the air at their utmost speed, they hurled themselves with the ram upon every Moslem or Russian vessel that they could meet or overtake, crashing into her with irresistible force and going with her into annihilation as their two cargoes of shells exploded under the shock.

The last sun rose and saw the fight still going on. What had begun as the greatest battle in the history of war had now dwindled down to a series of single combats. At length the end came. It was a few minutes after midday that the last blow in the battle was struck. Ten Russian and Moslem air-ships, all that remained of the great fleet that Olga had brought against Aeria, formed in line ten miles from the Ridge and made a last attempt to break through the defences.

Flying through a storm of shells from the land batteries, seven of them were torn to pieces and the other three, just as they reached the Ridge, were met obliquely by the five remaining vessels of the Aerian fleet. The same moment the *Alma's* broadside was discharged upon them, friend and foe vanished together in a mist of flame—and so ended the assault and defence of Aeria.

"We can go down now!" said Alan in a broken voice to

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Alma, who was standing white and speechless with horror at his side in the bows of the air-ship. "It is all over! God rest their gallant souls, for they left the world like brave men and true Aerians!"

"Amen!" sighed Alma. Then, after a brief pause, she said—"I wonder whether Olga Romanoff is alive or dead?"

The two air-ships now sank together and alighted close to the entrance to the caverns.

There the splendid fabrics were reluctantly abandoned, their crews disembarked, taking with them everything they wished to preserve, and a minute inspection was made for the last time of the triple doors and the machinery for lowering them and filling the spaces between them with water to be frozen as soon as they were in their places.

This occupied the time until the evening, and then all went once more into the open air to take what might be their last look at the sun. The waters of the lake were now within a few feet of the entrance, creeping more and more slowly upwards, and across the vast expanse of water, lying unruffled by the lightest breeze, fell the mingled rays of the sinking sun and the brightening Fire-Cloud.

There was not a cloud in the heavens and no breath of wind relieved the almost suffocating heat of the inert and sultry air. It seemed as though all terrestrial nature lay paralysed in a stupor of terror, waiting for the fire-blast that would wither it into death and ruin.

As the sun sank down behind the veil of flame his disc loomed redly and dully through it. Long streams of fire, blue and green and orange, darted across the disc and leapt and played round its circumference until it sank finally out of sight. The little group on the shore of the lake gazed at each other in silence as it disappeared.

Their faces looked wan and ghastly in the awful light that now reigned supreme in the heavens. Most of them turned away in grief and horror too deep for words, and with one last look at earth and sky, crept into the caverns, unable any longer to support the terror of the scene.

But a few remained, determined to see the fearful drama played out to the end, if they could, and among these were Alan and Alexis, whose duty kept them by the doors, the President and Francis Tremayne, and Alma and Isma, whom nothing could persuade to leave their husbands' sides.

No human eyes had ever beheld so magnificent or so awful a display of celestial splendours as they beheld during the three hours that they stood in the doorway after sunset. The Fire-Cloud now covered almost the whole heavens, and its enormous nucleus blazed like a gigantic sun down out of the zenith with a heat and radiance that were almost insupportable.

Huge masses of flame leapt out continuously, as though hurled from its fiery heart, and were projected far beyond its circumference, while the incandescent cloud-mass which surrounded it was torn and convulsed by internal commotions which spread out and out in enormous waves of many-coloured fires until they disappeared below the horizon.

Still there was neither sound nor breath of wind upon earth, only the awful stillness in which the world waited for the hour of its doom to strike. At last, towards ten o'clock, the water began to lap the threshold of the entrance, and Alan, pointing to it, said—

"Come, we must take our last look at the world! It is time to lower the doors."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a low dull booming sound came echoing down the gorges of Mount Austral. They looked up and saw huge masses of snow and ice loosened from its upper heights gliding, at first slowly and then more and more swiftly, down towards the valley beneath, a mighty avalanche which in a few minutes more would carry irresistible ruin in its path.

"In with you all!" cried Alan. "Quick! That is the beginning of the end; the snows are melting and the waters will be over us in another hour."

All but he and Alexis hurried in, and they, grasping the levers on either side of the door, pulled them, and the enormous sheet of steel descended quickly along its grooves and shut them in from the outer world, upon which chaos was about to fall.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHE-WOLF TO HER LAIR.

N the mysterious revolution of human things it came about that the only spectator of the closing scene of the tragedy of humanity who endured and survived its final terrors was the woman to whom it had been due that the fire from heaven had fallen upon a world mad with the frenzy and agony of war instead of sane and calm with the sanity and calmness of peace and reason.

On the issue of the Battle of Aeria, Olga and, under her unnaturally acquired influence, the Sultan, had staked the empire of the world and lost it. Before the fight had been raging many hours even she was forced to admit that Aeria was impregnable to any assault that she could deliver. But when the Aerians began to practise the desperate tactics of the second day it became manifest that nothing but annihilation awaited the invading fleet, out-matched as it was in speed and gun-power by the new Aerian warships and the land batteries.

With eyes burning with rage and envy she had watched through her glasses the incomparable *Alma* floating serenely at her unattainable altitude far above the battle-storm, and she had pictured Alan, her former slave, standing upon her deck perhaps—bitterest thought of all—with his wedded love beside him, and like a very arbiter of war hurling his destroying lightnings far and wide upon her ships until the

supreme moment came in which he would descend like a very god from the upper air, and, hand in hand with Alma, strike the last terrible blow which would end the last conflict of man with man and leave neither friend nor foe alive to tell what the issue had been.

It would be a glorious end, worthy of him and the splendid traditions of his race, and she loathed herself for the craven fear that had seized upon her in the fateful hour of battle, and made her incapable of challenging the same fate at his hands. Khalid himself would have done so without hesitation, but she had robbed him of his manhood and debased him, as she had debased every other human being that had fallen under her influence.

She had spent nearly the whole of the night of the 22nd on deck, and when the awful radiance of the Fire-Cloud was for the last time succeeded by the light of day, even her haughty spirit had at last bowed before the supernatural terrors that were multiplying about her. For the first time since she had brought bloodshed back into the world a thrill of panic shuddered through her soul, and, for the first time, she learnt the meaning of fear.

Then, too, came a longing which for the time being overmastered all other considerations. The elementary animal instinct of self-preservation rose up within her with irresistible force and conquered the hate and the ambition whose objects would have vanished when another sun had risen.

Her thoughts went back to her old stronghold in the snowy solitudes of Antarctica, to the deep dark caverns of Mount Terror. Surely those mighty walls of living rock, shrouded in eternal ice and snow, would give her an asylum in which she could defy the fate that was about to overwhelm humanity—and what then? For a moment an awful vision of the unspeakable loneliness of such a survival amidst the ruins of the world struck such terror to her heart that she almost resolved to head the *Revenge* into the thick of the fight that was still raging round Aeria, and die rather than

face it. Then the vision passed, and the terrors of the present blotted out the fear of the future.

The last sun that the human race would ever see was just rising when she sent for Boris Lossenski, who was still commanding the *Revenge* under her, and said abruptly, and without even consulting Khalid, who was standing by her side—

"There is nothing but death to be found here. We will escape if we can. Head the ship for Mount Terror and make her fly as she has never flown before. Don't spare either the engines or the power. We must be there before nightfall if possible."

Boris saluted and obeyed in silence, and Olga turned to Khalid and said in a tone of weariness and almost of despair—

"It is no use fighting any longer. The Fates themselves are against us, and I—yes, I have been frightened into belief at last. A shameful confession is it not?"

"Not shameful but only reasonable," he replied. "All I regret is that you did not believe sooner, and save this last slaughter of these gallant people."

"What is done, is done!" she said with a half-regretful glance at the mountains of Aeria, which were now rapidly fading away into the blue distance; "it is only a question of sooner instead of later. Indeed, it seems hardly worth while even for us to attempt to live when, even if we survive, only the ruins of the world can be ours. And yet"—

"Yet sweeter would be life with you even in a wilderness of death than destruction that might be eternal parting," replied Khalid in low tones that thrilled with passion. "Nay, what dearer destiny could man desire than to be the Adam of a new world of which you were the Eve?"

The words of her husband—for Khalid was her husband now as well as her slave—brought a sudden flush to Olga's face, and this was succeeded by an almost deathly pallor. She put up her hand to the broadened circlet of gold which concealed the terrible scar of the wound made by Alan's bullet, and said almost in a whisper—

"You and I—yes, you and I may live. We *will*! But if we do we must save ourselves alone."

And with that she left him abruptly and went to her own room with the plan of her last crime already shaped in her mind.

She was the only woman on board the *Revenge*. Her maid Anna had been left behind at Alexandria, a maniac driven mad by the universal terror. What of Boris and the twenty-five men who formed the air-ship's crew? If they were permitted to survive to the time when there would be no law but might, she would be the one woman in the world—one woman, beautiful and almost defenceless, among those who, though now her servants, would then be ready to slay each other in the dispute as to which of them should be her master.

Such a thought in such a mind as hers could have but one outcome. When the hour for the midday meal arrived, she bade Boris invite the whole crew into the main saloon, saying that, as this might be the last meal that any of them would eat, they would take it together. Then, as though moved by some sudden gracious fancy, she filled for every man with her own hands a glass of the best and oldest wine that had been reserved for her own use.

Khalid, rigid Moslem as he was, refused it, and she only touched it with her lips, but the others drained their glasses and drank death at her hands, even as the Aerians had drunk it in the same fashion and at the same table seven years before.

But this time it was fated that her sin should find her out more quickly. Later on in the afternoon Boris, to his amazement and alarm, found every man of his crew succumbing to an irresistible drowsiness, and soon this began to affect himself. A terrible thought at once flashed into his ever-suspicious mind. Fighting against the stupor that was stealing over his senses, he took a deep draught of strong spirit.

This conquered the poison for a time and cleared his intellect sufficiently for him to see what his pitiless mistress had done, and then there rose up in his mind a desperate longing for

vengeance on the murderess who had used him and his companions as long as they were useful and then poisoned them like so many rats.

He took out his pistol and examined it to see if it was charged, and then, with the poison and the spirit fighting in his brain for mastery, he made his way from the engine-room to the quarter-deck, where Olga and Khalid were standing, watching with strained, fascinated eyes and faces that looked livid and corpse-like in the unnatural light of the Fire-Cloud, the long tongues of many-coloured flame that were shooting like so many gigantic serpents down from the zenith, as though they would lick the life-blood out of the world that now lay panting for breath and paralysed with fear beneath them.

Just as he reached the top of the companion-way a mist swam before Boris's eyes, his brain reeled, and he stumbled forward on to the deck, discharging his pistol aimlessly as he did so. The bullet struck and broke to fragments against the bulwarks. Khalid and Olga turned round to see him lying on his side with savagely-gleaming eyes, livid face, and foam-flecked lips, trying to raise himself on one hand and take aim at them with the other.

As Khalid sprang forward Olga's ever-ready pistol came out of her belt. She cried to Khalid to get out of the line of fire, but just as she spoke Boris made his last effort, and, taking what aim he could, pulled the trigger. Khalid stopped short and clasped his hand to his right side. Then Olga, with a low cry of fury breaking from her white lips through her clenched teeth, sent a bullet through Boris's brain just as he was struggling to bring his pistol up again.

"Are you hurt, Khalid?" she asked with a deadly fear at her heart as she crossed the deck to where he was standing with his hand still pressed to his side.

"Yes," he gasped. "He has shot me through the lung."

Then he coughed, and Olga saw drops of blood on his black beard and moustache. Without wasting any time in useless words she helped him down into the saloon and set herself at

once to examine and dress his wound. The bullet had entered between the fourth and fifth ribs on the right side, drilled a clean hole through the lower lobe of the right lung, and passed out at the back without touching any bone.

With perfect rest and quiet there was nothing to prevent recovery from such a wound, but Olga shuddered as she thought of its consequences in their present situation. If Khalid succumbed, as he well might do under the unknown terrors and dangers of the night that was now so near, she would have to choose between killing herself beside him, or, if the rock-chambers of Mount Terror proved a safe asylum, living mateless and alone until she starved to death on the wilderness that the world would be when it had passed through its baptism of fire.

She satisfied Khalid's whispered request for an explanation of Boris's attempt on their lives by saying that he had probably made himself drunk in an attempt to fortify himself against the terrors that were multiplying around him. Then she went through the ship and in a few minutes came back and said—

"I shall have to take the ship to Mount Terror myself. It was not only Boris, for every man of the crew is dead drunk. Think of them making such brutes of themselves at such a time!

"No," she continued, putting her hand on his shoulder as she saw him make an attempt to rise. "You must not move yet; you will want all your strength when we get there, for you will have to regulate the engines while I am in the conning-tower. As for these animals, we will leave them to their fate."

A couple of hours later she went on deck to see whether Mount Terror, or at anyrate the smoke-crest of Mount Erebus, was in sight, for the *Revenge* had now been flying almost long enough to have reached the confines of Antarctica. The speed was, however, so great that nothing was distinctly visible. There was only the flaming heaven above and a grey blurr beneath, so she went to the engine-room and slowed down to a hundred miles an hour.

Then she helped Khalid to the engineer's seat in front of the controlling levers and took her place in the conning-tower. She had scarcely been at her post half an hour before she saw the huge white cones of the twin mountains of Antarctica shining against the dull grey sky beyond, one of them crowned as she had last seen it by a long stream of smoke that rose almost vertically in the windless air.

She signalled to Khalid to reduce the speed, first to fifty and then to thirty miles an hour, allowing the *Revenge* at the same time to sink gently down towards the ice-covered continent. She crossed the well-remembered bay in which the *Narwhal* had performed her terrible exploit, swept over the ice-wall at an elevation of a hundred feet, swung the ship round and stopped her in front of the great cleft in the side of Mount Terror.

No human foot seemed to have trodden the Antarctic solitude from the day she left it to crown herself Tsarina of the Russias to this one on which she brought her flagship back with its crew of murdered men to seek her last chance of life amidst the general doom which she could now almost bring herself to believe she had directly brought upon the world.

She ran the *Revenge* slowly into the vast portal that yawned black and deep before her between the snow slopes of the mountain, and then, turning on the search-light, took her along the great gallery which led to the shore of the subterranean lake, and there lowered her for the last time to the earth. Then she and Khalid disembarked, he moving slowly and painfully, and she supporting him as well as she was able, and watching him with the intense anxiety of a supreme selfishness which had now centred itself upon him as the one possibility of making her life endurable.

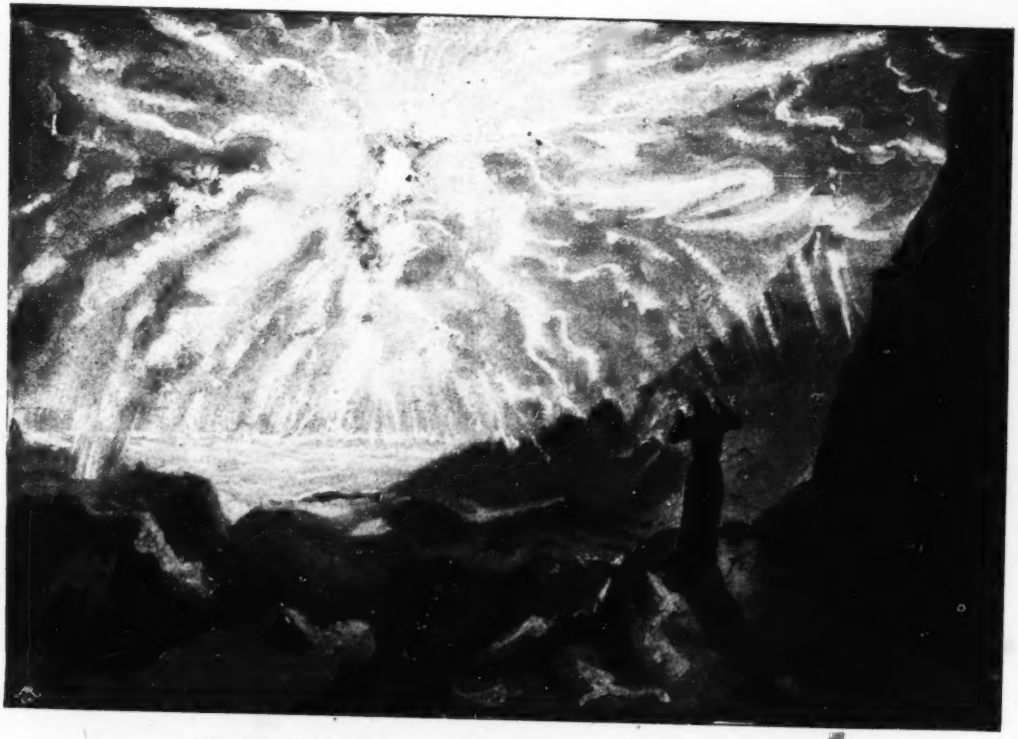
Thus did Tsarina Olga and Khalid the Magnificent, conquerors of the earth and sharers of the world-throne, come back, one wounded almost to death, and the other half distraught with fear and perplexity, to take refuge at the uttermost ends of the earth from the assault of the foe that had confounded all their schemes of conquest.

Leaving the *Revenge* in the great gallery, she led him to the council chamber and laid him on the cushions of the luxurious divan on which she had been wont to hold her audiences. There she examined and redressed his wound, and then for the next three hours she busied herself bringing supplies of food and drink from the ship and preparing for the final siege which their last stronghold would so soon have to endure.

Then the fancy took her to go once more into the air to take one more look at the world and the splendours of the fate that was menacing it. Nineteen hours had passed since she gave the order to head the *Revenge* for Mount Terror. Sixteen of these had been consumed in the most rapid flight that the air-ship had ever accomplished. So fast had the *Revenge* flown westward and southward that the sun had almost seemed to stand still waiting for her journey to be accomplished, but still it had slowly sunk farther and farther down into the luminous mist that now seemed to fill the whole sky.

The difference between the longitude of Aeria and Mount Terror had lengthened the last fateful day by nearly five hours, but now the end was very near at hand, and here even, on the very confines of the world, life had little more than four hours to live. To the north the whole sky was flaming out into indescribable splendours, and the long fire-streams radiating from the nucleus now seemed to be literally holding the planet in their clasp. Enormous meteors were bursting out from the heart of the flaming cloud and exploding without a sound in the ever-silent abysses of space.

She stood rooted to the spot by the weird and awful glories of the spectacle, and for the time being seemed to forget even Khalid and the indescribable dangers that were threatening them both. Instead of being daunted, her spirit rose as though in response to the splendours before her. She felt that she was standing upon Nature's funeral pyre watching the conflagration of the world she had ruined. Saving only Khalid there was not another human being within thousands of miles of her, and in her loneliness her soul seemed to expand and rise to a nobility that it had never known before.



THE BLAZING SKY WAS LITERALLY RAINING FIRE OVER SEA AND LAND.

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She saw the utter insignificance and contemptibility of the human strife which had been superseded and silenced by this majestic assault of the primal forces of Nature, and for the first time in her life she thought of herself and her sins with a disgust and shame that humbled her in her own eyes to the dust.

So she stood and watched, oblivious of everything but the celestial glories above and around her, until a rapid series of frightful explosions seemed to run roaring round the whole horizon. She looked up with shaded eyes towards the zenith. The central mass had suddenly become convulsed and expanded until it looked as though the whole sky had been transformed into an ocean of fire torn by incessant storms.

Huge masses of many-coloured flame were falling from it in all directions on the devoted earth, and as each of these entered the atmosphere it burst into myriads of fragments which fell in swarms until the blazing sky was literally raining fire over sea and land.

The Fire-Cloud had at last invaded the outer confines of the earth's atmosphere.

All this while there had been no change in the Antarctic cold of the air, but soon after the first storm of explosions roared out Olga felt a puff of warm tainted air blow across her face. Then came another and another, and then she heard what had never been heard before on the slopes of Mount Terror—the sound of running water. The snows were melting, and soon there would come avalanche and deluge.

She hurried back into the council chamber, convinced that it was no longer safe to remain in the open air. She made the great bronze doors fast and covered them with layer after layer of thick heavy curtains. Every other opening into the chamber she closed up as tightly as possible. In the nature of the case they were compelled to trust to the supply of air already in it to last them through the ordeal.

Then she went and sat down on the divan by Khalid's side, and, taking his hand in hers, bent over him and kissed him on the lips, saying—

"Now we must wait for life or death together!"

And so they waited—waited while the ages-old snow and ice melted from the bare black rocks under the fierce breath of the fire-storm; while the ocean of flame seethed and roared and eddied about them, licking up the seas and melted snows and fighting with them as fire and water have fought since the world began; while the foundations of the Southern Pole quivered and rocked beneath their feet, and the walls of their refuge quaked and cracked with the throes of the writhing earth, and cosmos was dissolved into chaos once more.

EPILOGUE.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

HE temperature has been normal now for three hours. Don't you think we may venture to raise the sluice-gate?"

"I see nothing against it. If the world is not habitable again now it never will be. It is a good two days since the contact now, and if the atmosphere had been burnt up or carried away by the attraction of the comet it would either be much colder or much hotter than that."

"Very well then, up it comes, and then we shall get our last question answered."

It was Alan who thus questioned and answered his father. All had gone well with the refugees of Mount Austral and the remnant of the Aerian race. Their science and their faith in themselves had been triumphantly justified by the event and had carried them safely through the sternest ordeal that man had ever been called upon to face.

And now there was only one more chance to be met, one more problem to be solved. The temperature showed that the earth still possessed an atmosphere, but was that atmosphere capable of supporting human life? If yes, all would be well and they could go forth into the wasted world and possess and replenish it. If no, then all their labour would have been in vain and they might as well have died in battle or with those friends and kin who had taken their silent and dignified farewell of the world in the last days of the State of Aeria.

They had a calorimeter and a pressure-gauge communicating with the outer world to tell the temperature and the height of the water in the valley. The former, after rising for a few hours to over a thousand degrees, had now sunk back to normal, while the latter stood at thirty feet above the entrance doors to the cavern.

The machinery for raising the sluice-gate was put into motion and they watched it with almost breathless anxiety lest the straining or shifting of the rocks, which had been very perceptible during the terrific convulsions which had apparently lasted for nearly ten hours, should have so dislocated the grooves that the gate could not be raised.

There were a few preliminary creaks and groans, a hitch and an increased strain on the lifting chains, and then the great sheet of steel rose easily and smoothly to the top of the channel and the pent-up waters rushed forth in a black boiling flood through the narrow opening and roared away, foaming and tossing along the bottom of the crevasse, once more on their way to their unknown destination.

Very soon after this it was discovered that the waters were subsiding much more rapidly than could be accounted for by the volume that escaped through the subterranean channel. It was therefore necessary to conclude that there must have been some convulsion in another part of the mountains which had opened a fresh channel from the lake to the outer world.

The next step was to raise the two inner of the three doors which guarded the entrance to the caverns. The raising of the first one showed the ice still intact between it and the second, and this had to be broken up and removed before the second could be reached. Then the middle door was raised an inch or so and the water spurted out from beneath it.

Was this the water of the melted ice or was it that which filled the valley? Had their outer door stood firm or had it cracked or shrivelled up under the heat of the furnace through which the earth had passed? It flowed for ten minutes and then slackened and stopped. The outer door had held fast. Then, in case of accidents, the middle one was lowered again

and they waited until the waters should have sufficiently subsided to enable them to challenge the last hazard on which their fate depended.

The sluice-gate had been raised at what would be four o'clock on the morning of the 26th of September, if the cataclysm through which the earth had passed had not so far affected the terrestrial economy as to alter the relations of day and night. Twelve hours later the pressure-gauge ceased to act, showing that the rapidly-sinking waters of the lake had reached the threshold of the outer door. The time had now come to ask the question on the answer to which the lives of the remnant of humanity depended—was the atmosphere breathable or not?

That was the one question which occupied, to the momentary exclusion of all others, the mind of every Aerian who was in the caverns. The middle gate was lifted, and every heart stood still as Alan and Alexis strode forward into the dark passage and grasped the levers which actuated the lifting mechanism of the outer one.

They took one glance back at the anxious faces which showed so white in the gleam of the electric lamps, and then they pulled. The machinery creaked and groaned as the power was applied. Then came a rending sound and a dull crash. The door lifted a little, quivered and dropped again, and remained immovable.

"The machinery has broken down!" said Alan, going back into the gallery. "There must have been a land-slip over the doorway."

"What will you do then?" said Alma. "Surely we have not escaped the conflagration of the world to be buried alive after all!"

"No," he said, looking down at her with a reassuring smile. "It can hardly be as bad as that. Unless a whole mountain has fallen in front of the door, we shall soon find a way out."

The first thing to be done was to get rid of the door, and this Alan accomplished in summary fashion by undermining it with drills, and then, after he had sent everyone into the inner

recesses of the caverns, tearing it to fragments with a small quantity of the explosive used in the shells.

A mass of earth and stones came rolling into the gallery immediately after the explosion, then an excavating machine was run up on hastily-laid rails and was soon boring its way into the obstructing mass. A distance of ten yards was tunnelled and then there was a rattle and whir in front of the machine, which told that the work was done. There was a cloud of dust from pulverised stones and earth and then came a rush of fresh warm air and a gleam of sunlight through the opening.

"Thank God the atmosphere is still there and the sun is still shining!" cried Alan, as he drew the machine back and ran out into the open air.

He looked about him for a few moments and then turned and walked back to his companions, who were already crowding towards the opening with faces glad with new hope and drawing deep breaths of the life-giving air, which the mysterious alchemy of Nature had restored unchanged to the earth. He stopped them with a gesture and said—

"Don't go out yet till we have made the tunnel safe. You will find an awful change out yonder. Aeria is no longer a paradise. It is only a swamp surrounded by naked rocks!"

And so they found it to be when they at length passed out through the tunnel and stood upon the black oozy shores of the dreary lake which still half filled what had once been the lovely land of Aeria.

The once verdure-clad mountains rose up bare and gaunt and blackened, a vast circle of ragged rock, unrelieved by a blade of grass or a single tree of all the myriads that had clothed their slopes three days before. It seemed as though the clock of Time had been put back through countless ages and the world was once more as it had been before the first forms of life appeared upon it.

But still the air that fanned their cheeks was fresh and warm and sweet, and the afternoon sun was shining across the western peaks out of a cloudless sky of purest blue. The calm

had come after the storm and the world was waiting to begin its life anew. The *Alma* and the *Isma* had utterly vanished, and were probably buried deep in the black slimy mud. Of the city of Aeria not a vestige was visible.

The first thing that Alan did as soon as the last momentous question had thus been asked and answered was to ask his father to order one of the smaller air-ships, which had been stored in sections in the cavern, to be put together and charged with motive-power as rapidly as possible.

"Certainly if you wish it," he replied; "but what is your reason for being in such a hurry to reassert your empire of the air?"

"I can tell you now," said Alan in reply, "what there would have been no need to tell you if, well, if we had not been able to leave the caverns. Just after sunrise on the last day of the battle Bruno Vincent brought the *Orion* as near as he could to the *Alma* and told me by signal that he had seen the *Revenge* leave the fight and head away at full speed to the southward and westward. That means, I think, that Olga's courage failed her at the last and that she meant to try the forlorn hope of saving herself in her old stronghold at Mount Terror. I am going to see whether she is alive or dead."

"And suppose by a miracle you should find her alive. What then?" said Alma, who had overheard his request, coming up to him and looking up into his face with melting eyes as she slipped her hand caressingly through his arm.

"The world is beginning its life anew in us, dear," he replied with tenderness in his eyes but none in his voice, "and there shall be no snake in our Eden if I"—

"If you have to be the Cain of the new world to prevent it!" interrupted Alma, reading his dark meaning at a glance, and interpreting it with a directness and force that startled him. "No, Alan, that must not be! If she has escaped the vengeance of God you may well forego yours. I can hardly think that she is still alive, but it is right that we should go and see"—

"We!" echoed Alan before she could finish. "Do you

mean that you will come with me? No, Alma, you must not do that. Remember that if she has by any chance escaped, the crew of the *Revenge* may be alive too, and then we may have to fight"—

"No, no, Alan, not that! not that!" she cried with a gesture of horror. "The world has done with fighting, for there is nothing left to fight about. We will go as friends with open hands to them, and the new life of the world shall be begun with the forgiveness of our enemies. Who are we that we should judge after the Voice of God has spoken?"

In the end she had her way, and so it came to pass that soon after sunrise on the following day an air-ship, which a hundred skilled and willing hands had toiled all night in fitting together and equipping for her voyage, rose into the air above the ghastly wilderness that had once been Aeria, and winged her way towards the southern pole.

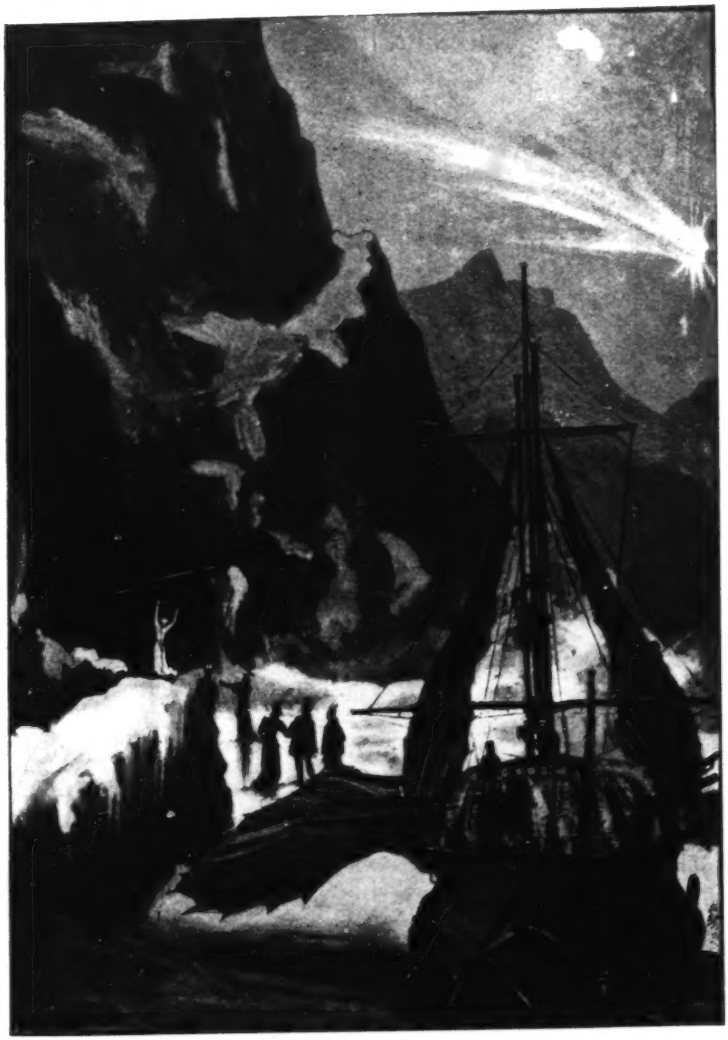
Twenty hours later she sank down on to the ice that had already re-covered the rocks in front of the fissure in the side of Mount Terror, and as she did so a figure came forth out in the darkness into the half light of the polar morning.

"Look! There she is!" said Alma in an awe-stricken whisper to Alan. "Alone in this awful place! Come, let us go to her."

As she spoke the gangway steps were lowered and she descended them first, followed by Alan, his father, Alexis, and Isma. Some strange influence held the others back as she advanced with outstretched hands and words of kindly greeting on her lips towards the piteous wreck of womanhood that slowly emerged from the gloom of the chasm.

Olga Romanoff had survived the doom of the world, but the hand of a just vengeance had fallen heavily upon her. Her once splendid form was shrunken as though three score years had passed over her in as many hours. Her left side was half paralysed and her shaking limbs hung loosely as she tottered along.

Her golden fillet and jewelled wings had been cast away, leaving bare the great livid scar that crossed her forehead; her white, drawn face was seamed with deep lines marked by agony



OLGA ROMANOFF HAD SURVIVED THE DOOM OF THE WORLD.

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and terror, and the thick masses of the once glorious hair that hung about her head and shoulders were streaked with grey and clotted with blood.

The fire had died out of her eyes and the red from her shrivelled lips, and the weak broken voice in which she answered Alma's greeting quavered like that of an old woman in her dotage.

"I have been expecting you," she said as Alma took her trembling hands in hers. "I thought you would come. You have come for Alan, haven't you? He is yonder, but he is dead. I kept him alive as long as I could but he was wounded, and when the world was changed to hell for my sins the fire choked him.

"I tried to die too, but it wouldn't kill me. There was air enough for me and I wanted to give it to him to breathe but he wouldn't take it. I suppose you have been dead and are an angel now like those others behind you. Come, I will take you to him. It is dark but I know the way."

The moment she began to speak Alma saw the awful calamity that had befallen her. The haughty daring spirit that had essayed and almost achieved the conquest of the world was dissolved in the bitter waters of the Marah of Madness. The soul that had quailed before no human fear had collapsed into imbecility under the superhuman terrors which she alone had witnessed and survived. Without a word she suffered her to lead her into the gloom, beckoning to the others to follow. They turned on the electric lamps they had brought with them and entered the chasm.

They reached the black ash-strewn floor of the gloomy subterranean lake in the heart of the mountain, and Alan, pausing for a moment, flashed the light of his lamp round the vast chamber that had once been so terribly familiar to him. The walls were burnt and blackened, and here and there masses of rock and boulders had been calcined to dust as though the long pent-up lava that had once flowed in fiery torrents over them had again been let loose.

Then the light fell upon something that was not rock and

which gave back a dull metallic sheen. He took a few strides towards it and soon recognised it as all that was left of the once shapely and beautiful *Ithuriel*, the old flagship of the Aerian fleet with which he had lost the mastery of his own manhood and his people the empire of the air.

The crystal dome of the roof was gone and lay in patches of congealed glass about the blackened and shrivelled-up deck. The wings were burnt away and the transverse ribs of azurine stood out bare and twisted like the bones of a skeleton, and in the fore part of the hull a great gap showed where her magazine had taken fire and burnt with such terrific heat that it had melted even the azurine plates of which she was built.

"The poor old *Ithuriel* has flown her last flight!" he said to himself with a sigh as he turned away and followed the others, thinking sadly of all that had come to pass since he had last trodden her deck.

Olga, holding Alma by the hand, led the way from the lower gallery to the council chamber. As she pulled the curtain aside from the doorway a puff of foul air that seemed to bear a faint smell of blood was wafted in their faces. Alan called Alma back, fearing that she would faint in the sickening atmosphere, and at the sound of his voice Olga stopped short and looked back with a reawakened gleam in her eyes.

"Who is that?" she cried, pressing her hand to her brow. "Why, it is Alan! But no, Alan is here—here. He has been with me all the time since Khalid shot him. My God, can he have come to life again?"

Her voice rose to a shrill wavering scream as she said this. She dropped Alma's hand and ran with faltering, stumbling steps towards a divan on which lay the form of a man whose black beard and moustache were thickly clotted with blood. She stopped and bent over it for a moment, then she raised herself and faced them with her hands locked in her hair and the light of frenzied insanity blazing in her eyes.

"No! No!" she cried in a voice, half a scream and half a wail, that rang weirdly through the great chamber. "He is dead still and that is only his ghost. Oh, Alan, my love, Alan!

Why could I not die with you? Curse the hand that wounded you. Curse"—

In the one syllable her voice died away from a scream to a whisper, and at the same instant the paralysis, which had already smitten her once, laid its swift icy hand on her heart and brain. She swayed to and fro for a moment and then fell forward across the corpse of the man whose love for her had plunged the world into madness on the eve of its doom.

"What an awful end!" gasped Alma, shuddering in the close embrace she had sought in Alan's arms. "And yet, Alan, she loved you to the end through all. That love for you was the one true thing in her life, and for its sake I will say God forgive her! Come, let us go!"

THE END.

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